

From Cathy Popyer, a New Jersey mother whose daughter, Niki, suffered multiple concussions playing basketball.

My daughter has had 11 concussions and is just a shadow of her former self. Just to be clear, several of them were sustained since she stopped playing basketball and some were classified as concussions in retrospect. Basketball has consumed her life since she was in pre-school. She started playing for our township rec league at 8. By 9, she was playing up a year on a nationally competitive AAU team.

As she got older, her interest and participation expanded, as did the hours she donated to it. Over the years, she worked with coaches and trainers in her own effort to be the very best she could be. She battled the usual sprains and strains, broken fingers and nose, and even chronic knee pain. She never once chose a social activity over basketball, always willing and eager to work on her game. Everything she did was leading up to playing in high school, which would fulfill her first important goal.

Her first hit was in seventh grade, followed by a second head injury 8 days later. The next year brought a couple more and by high school she had had several. Some came from a fall to the floor from an over-zealous defender, some looked more deliberate. The most serious was an accidental hit in the head when a teammate pushed the gym door open while she was on the other side, four weeks after a really bad mid-air collision.

On many occasions we chose to go to the ER and on others we were taken by ambulance. She was examined and CT scanned, diagnosed and sent home. At first, she was told to stay out for one to two days; then maybe two weeks without contact sports. Another doctor said wait until the headaches stop. Then they told us she had to be symptom free for as long as she had symptoms. Well, the headaches never did stop, and the suggestion was way too subjective for a teenage athlete determined to shake it off and get back on the court.

We sought the advice of doctors, her pediatrician and specialists, and were given inconsistent information. The ER doctors and nurses were starting to consider us hysterical parents. After one vicious hit that left her unable to see for two minutes, the hospital was much more interested in whether the bandages that held her kneecaps in place were hiding physical abuse. They sent her home with no instructions other than to consult her doctor. Again she was cleared to play.

After a lengthy lay-off, even with constant headaches, she was cleared to return and in the first play of the first game of her sophomore year, she had a head on head collision at mid court. The entire gym gasped in unison, as she lay on the floor holding her head and screaming. Everyone's heart dropped as she passed out and we waited for the EMS to load her onto the ambulance.

They refused to CT scan her another time, and the next day we saw a pediatric neurologist. After numerous head injuries over several years, he was the very first person to shut her down completely.

The next couple of months were tragic. She twitched for a couple of weeks, she couldn't tolerate any noise or lights, she couldn't watch TV or read or use the computer, she lost all interest in everything, even her friends. She cried every day; for how she felt and for what she lost. The doctors prescribed

medication that helped a little, but they did not bring back the person she was before. After being out of school for many weeks, we were able to arrange home instruction, but she could barely concentrate on even one subject a day.

She returned to school some months later on a shortened day with a limited course load. Towards the end of the year, she added another hour but the strain of trying to concentrate was exhausting.

Then we got lucky. Thanks to the trainer at our school, we were put in touch with Dr. Jill Brooks, who is a neuropsychologist specializing in concussions in youth athletes. Niki started seeing her and we learned that her symptoms were consistent with post-concussion syndrome. After being doubted, she finally had someone who understood and explained why she was feeling so bad and validated her emotional and physical response to her injuries.

She still has difficulties in school and although they have been very responsive to her needs, there have been teachers who don't believe her despite her section 504 plan. She struggles to keep up in lower level classes, has not been able to get her driver's permit yet, can't ride a train, go in the ocean, or participate in any sports. She wears earplugs because noise bothers her, she is sensitive to light, and cannot attend any event where there is a potential that she will be hit in her head. At this point, even a light tap the wrong way can render her unconscious.

We got here because along the way the information and awareness about head injuries was limited. That seems to be changing now, but it needs to change more quickly and more dramatically to protect other kids from suffering. Every school needs to have a certified athletic trainer who is educated about concussions and who is strong enough to deny return to play for injured students. The trainer must have testing available to adequately and objectively measure the degree of damage. We are fortunate to have both in our school. Niki was administered the ImPact test on several occasions, the first time for a baseline and then periodically as she was injured. She went from 86th percentile to negative numbers. These types of tests are the only way to determine the degree of damage. We have learned that standard CT scans and MRI's are meaningless when it comes to concussions.

The cost to our school is about \$1700 for a two year subscription, which is up for renewal. We hope that because of Niki, they will automatically renew it. Our trainer has been an excellent advocate for injured student athletes and has implemented more stringent policies. They don't always sit well with the kids' competitive natures, but they are not capable of making these decisions by themselves. Athletes must change the mind-set that giving in to injuries is a sign of weakness. We, as adults, must make the right choices for the kids.

Niki will never see her dream to play basketball in college come true, but maybe we can help her peers realize that it's better to miss a season than to have to face never playing again.