

PLAYING HEAD GAMES

Sports-related concussions have been grabbing headlines recently. One reason is the motion picture "Concussion," released in December. It's the true story of a doctor who proves NFL stars suffer long after their playing days. The number of concussions, even deaths, is increasing among high school athletes, but love of the sport keeps them in the game.

odell graham | staff reporter

It's the fourth quarter against Frenship and the team is behind. Senior Aldo De La Rosa puts his helmet back on. He's ready to get back in.

His teammate stops him.

"You're done for the night," he says.

De La Rosa suffered a concussion that night.

"I lowered my head to hit the running back," he said. "I hit his leg and just blacked out. I asked, 'Where am I? Why can't I go back in the game? How did I get to the bench?' I remember getting up and immediately heading to the sideline, but the next thing I knew I was on the bench. I saw that the defense was in and I told Victor [Rodríguez], 'I gotta get back in there.' That's when he told me I was done, but I couldn't understand why."

De La Rosa is just one of more than 290,000 high school athletes who suffer from concussions and head injuries yearly.

"The headaches and dizziness stopped the next morning," he said. "I was sad having to sit on the sidelines watching the team get hyped against Santa Teresa, and I was miserable watching the game against Irvin when every play mattered. After I passed protocol and was cleared for practice, I was cautious on my first day back because my family doctor told me one more concussion and I couldn't play anymore. But after I hit the running back a couple of times I realized playing full speed was okay."

Headcase, a family-run organization dedicated to making youth sports safer, reports that one in five high school athletes will suffer a sports-related concussion during their season. Despite his experience, De La Rosa said he would allow his son to play football.

"In 10 to 15 years if I have a son, the technology and equipment will be more advanced, and he will be safer than I was," De La Rosa said. "In my house, football rules. I basically didn't have a choice to play football because my mom loves the game so much."

Helmets have become increasingly effective at absorbing impact, as they have evolved from leather shells to now air-filled cylinders independent of the outer shell.

For the past 10 years, Virginia Tech University has shared a helmet rating system with the public. The system lists the top performing helmets in football and hockey.

The movie "Concussion" examines

the discovery and long term effects of Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, or CTE. Dr. Bennet Omalu examines the brains of deceased former NFL players. His findings reveal the dangers of head trauma in football players and how repetitive traumatic blows cause breaking down of the brain tissue and the build-up of protein deposits.

De La Rosa said he saw the movie.

"The dementia, suicide, and aggression that happens to the guys in the movie is the last thing that I want to happen to me," De La Rosa said. "I don't ever want to have to deal with all of that."

Football concussions account for about 60 percent of all concussions in organized high school sports according to brainline.org.

Campus athletic trainer Paul Abrell has handled about 60 concussion protocols in the past three years and about 100 cases in his 20 years as an athletic trainer.

"Not all of the cases were concussions, but the protocol is in place to assess and monitor on-going signs and symptoms in any suspected case," Abrell said. "The protocol is based off the 'When in doubt, sit them out,' slogan. If anyone is suspected of suffering a concussion, we [athletic trainers] assess to see if they show any signs or symptoms. Those include headaches, nausea, empty staring and more."

State protocol also requires getting a doctor's clearance. Athletes are then put through stress tests to see if any signs or symptoms return. If they return, athletes must go to the doctor and start the cycle over again. If no signs and symptoms occur, the intensity of stress testing is increased until the trainer finds the athlete fit to return to full participation.

While the spotlight is on football related concussions, ice hockey and soccer rank second and third. Varsity boy's soccer coach David Rascon has

seen two concussions in his 37 years of coaching.

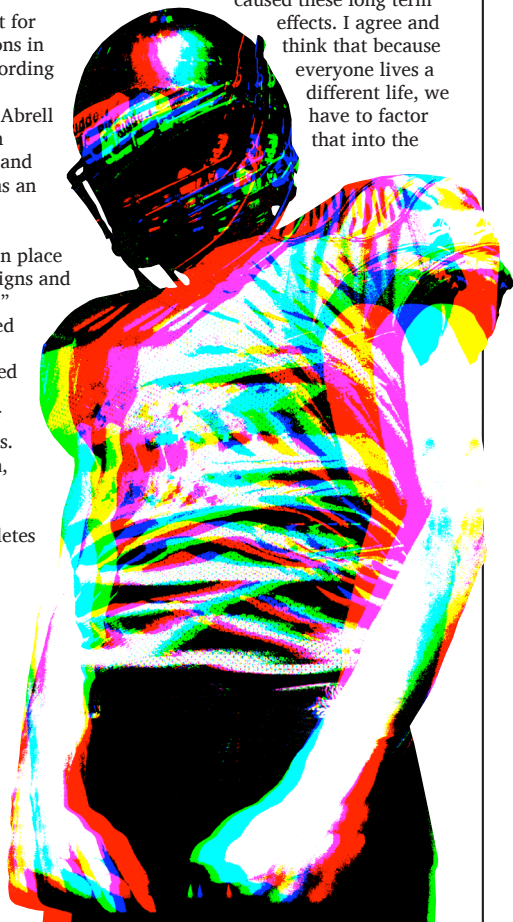
"I'd say that's a pretty good percentage," he said. "I teach my players to always jump vertically to avoid not only concussions, but also fouls."

Maria Kennedy, a former coach and currently district interim athletic director, calls the year-old state concussion protocol effective. She has a grandson who plays high school football and says she's not worried about the long term effects.

"Players can avoid serious injuries through being well-coached and with the ongoing improvement of the safety equipment," she said. "I heard Dr. Omalu from the movie, and former players talking about CTE on ESPN radio. Players said there isn't enough information regarding CTE and its effects to say that football alone

caused these long term

effects. I agree and think that because everyone lives a different life, we have to factor that into the



THE "INVISIBLE" INJURY

- When a concussion occurs, the brain shakes violently against the skull. This can alter the way your brain normally works.
- Basketball and soccer have the highest rates of concussions for girls. Female soccer players are 40 percent more likely than males to suffer a concussion.
- Athletes who suffer a concussion are one to two times more likely to suffer a second.