

Helmets and Protective Headgear Position Statement US Youth Soccer

Background

Why is discussion now occurring about protective headgear and helmet use in youth soccer?

- Numerous media outlets and commercial interests are reporting that as a result of heading the ball, head injuries are epidemic in soccer and that as a result, protection of players including the use of some type of helmet is required. Such reports however generally appear to be based on research that is either outdated or methodologically inadequate. As indicated by the US Soccer Physical Fitness and Sports Medicine Research Committee, at present there is no conclusive evidence that heading is dangerous to soccer players. More likely to cause injury is accidental or unexpected contact with the head by the ball, ground or by another player. Contributing to interest in these reports is the tremendous growth in youth soccer players from 888,000 in 1980 to almost 4,000,000 at present. Soccer is now the most popular team sport in the United States. Also important is that reports of larger numbers of injuries have been consistent with increased levels of participation.
- The impression created by the media and helmet manufacturers is that there are thousands of head injuries each year in youth soccer. If such were the case, then insurance data would provide documentation. BeneMarc, Inc. the largest writer of insurance for youth soccer players in the United States reported that in 1998 -2000 2,453 claims were filed. Of those, 19 involved heading with 17 being the result of player collisions and two when the ball hit players. The single concussion reported was as a result of player collision.

The Laws of the Game and their Application

What do the laws of the game say about protective headgear and helmet use?

- Currently, the FIFA Laws of the Game do not include protective headgear or helmets as an item of player equipment (Law Four). Items that may cause a player to endanger him/herself or others are not permitted.

How are decisions made and who makes them about the use of helmets at the youth level?

- FIFA formulates the Laws of The Game, US Youth Soccer develops Modified Laws for youth players and the US Soccer Referee Department is charged with training and certification of referees. Ultimately, individual game referees are charged with enforcing The Laws of The Game. With that responsibility would be disallowing the use of helmets.

What about children that are clearly at risk due to existing head injuries or disabilities?

- Although the Laws are clear as to what includes player's equipment, the use of additional protective equipment may be allowed in play involving children with mental or physical disabilities. These types of games occur outside the purview of FIFA Laws of The Game, they are adapted for the sake of participation of the individual. Many of these disabled players may participate as individuals and not on "teams" in the normal [context](#).

US Youth Soccer and Child Safety

What does US Youth Soccer believe and do about child safety?

- All US Youth Soccer programs including Coaching Education, Risk Management, TOPSoccer, and the Olympic Development Program always place the highest priority on providing safe environments for children playing the game. Through the provision of materials, information and training, State and Local Associations, Leagues, Clubs and Teams are provided with opportunities and reinforcement to provide instruction in the correct skills and techniques of soccer. Addressed are heading, appropriate adult supervision of games and practices and referee training including game management and field and goal safety inspection. Additionally, all State Associations require background checks, as needed for adults involved with youth players.

US Youth Soccer's Headgear Position

US Youth Soccer believes that protective headgear or helmets are not necessary for player safety. By providing appropriate adult supervision, proper coaching methods including techniques for correct heading and modern equipment, children can safely play and enjoy soccer free of untoward risk of head or other injuries. Several key points leading to this position are as follows:

- Proper instruction from coaches is essential in teaching children safe and correct techniques for heading and for all aspects of the game. Youth coaches are encouraged to attend coaching clinics or courses.
- Modern soccer balls are waterproof or water resistant, therefore lighter, and more comfortable to head than soccer balls used in the past. By using balls made of synthetic materials rather than leather reduces the use of older balls that could be waterlogged and heavy.
- A major concern regarding the use of headgear is that it may create a danger to other players. Players equipped with protective headgear/helmets may tend to play in a physically more aggressive and reckless manner, with less regard for personal injury and thus create risk for other players.
- Methodologically sound research has yet to be completed documenting that there is any unusual risk to children playing soccer as a result of heading.

¹ A Summary of What Research Tells Us About Heading And Head Injuries In Soccer. Sports Medicine Committee, United States Soccer Federation. 1999

² Statistical Abstract on Soccer Participation, US Soccer Youth Registration 1980-99. Soccer Industry Council of America. Fall 1999 Edition.

³ A Comprehensive Analysis of Youth Soccer Injuries. Bene-Marc, Inc. 1998.