

# THERE DOESN'T SEEM TO BE ANY JUSTICE\*

\* A more detailed account of the article, "One Wheelchair is Too Many," *Weeds, Trees & Turf*, September 1986  
by Dr. Kent Kurtz, Executive Secretary STMA

People are beginning to question whether that instant of glory, that thrill of performing in front of relatives, friends and neighbors, that satisfaction of running a few yards, making that desperation tackle, or scoring that touchdown, is really worth the risk of spending the rest of one's life a paraplegic or quadriplegic. Something must be done to curtail this senseless loss of young talent, the shattered dreams, and the ruined careers. One cannot fully realize the tragedy, anxiety and devastation that follow a football accident unless one experiences a catastrophic injury or knows someone who is permanently disabled.

A catastrophic injury is one in which the spinal cord is permanently disabled. When based upon player populations of 100,000, the incidence of catastrophic injuries is very small. For instance, in 1984, data indicate there were 1,575,000 participants in high school and college football, but only .38 were injured severely. Most spinal injuries are associated with either blocking or tackling and occur primarily to defensive players during regular games, and not as frequently, surprisingly, during practice sessions.

The author has a young friend who suffered a football field injury which has left him a quadriplegic. Jeff Wishard, age 26, lives in a small town in northwestern Illinois (Davis, Illinois, population 550) and is permanently confined to a wheelchair. Jeff's parents, Sandy and Ron, own an automotive body shop and gasoline station in Davis. Sandy also works for an optometrist in nearby Rockford, Illinois. Jeff's next oldest brother, Brian, works as a claim adjuster, middle brother Rick works with his father, and youngest brother, "Beaver", is a Junior in high school. The Wishard's exemplify the typical midwestern, hard-working middle class family who are very active in their community and well liked. The family was not prepared 11 years ago for the hospital bills, the special care required, the anxiety that followed or the weeks, months and years of learning to adjust and to accept a new kind of life.

## Tragedy Strikes

On a warm afternoon during the fall of 1975 (October 15th) the Dakota High Sports Turf Manager's Association

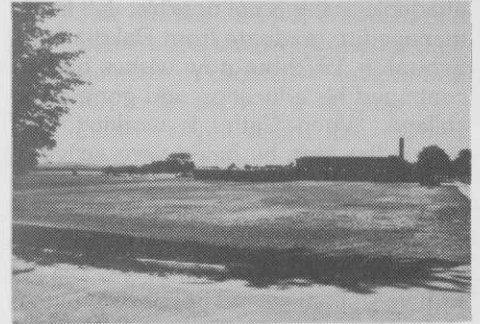
School frosh-soph football team was going through a normal practice session.\* Jeff vividly recalls that day, "We had just finished doing calisthenics on the practice field and our coach, Jeff Clark, was conducting what he called the 'hamburger drill'. This drill consisted of two blocking dummies and two football players—one offensive, one defensive. The defensive player would lie on his back facing the opposite direction from the offensive player. At the proper signal the offensive player would charge between the two dummies and try to avoid being tackled by the defensive player. As the defensive player I was supposed to jump up, turn around and tackle the offensive player. On my first attempt I slipped on the hard, bare soil surface and by the time I recovered, the offensive player had gotten past me. However, the coach made me do it over again. All I can remember from my second attempt is falling to the ground in severe pain and calling for the coach. I laid on my back while my helmet, socks and shoes were being removed. I knew something serious was wrong and I think the coach and team manager knew I had broken my neck. An ambulance was called when I showed no sensation to their running a pencil along the bottom of my feet."

"Periodically during the ambulance ride to the Freeport Hospital I woke up. I vaguely remember seeing my mother as I was wheeled into an emergency room. When I woke up again I was being transferred to Rockford Memorial Hospital. During the ride the shock must have subsided and I hurt real bad. When we arrived my father was waiting and I will never forget the shocked expression on his face; he was as white as a ghost. Soon afterward I learned that I had a broken neck, several fractured cervical vertebrae, and that I would probably be a quadriplegic the rest of my life."

"No one is really sure how the accident happened. One theory is that our helmets hit and that my head and helmet were jammed back into my neck. The other theory is that on impact my head may have been forced down into the ground. Perhaps if I had been wearing a styrofoam collar the injury could have been prevented. However, I do know that the practice field was in real poor condition. The field we used for practice was used

\* Dakota High School is a member of the Northwest Illinois Conference

for many activities other than football and was extremely hard. The only maintenance to the field was a weekly mowing. They never reseeded the field, or applied fertilizer, water or did anything to control the weeds. When the field was wet it was muddy. During the hot, dry weather in the fall the surface was hard and traction was very poor. It was comparable to the farmer's fields adjacent to the school. Why is it that people wait until someone gets hurt to fix a playing field?"



Dakota, Illinois High School football practice field where Jeff Wishard was injured in October 1975.

"I know that the football helmet I was using was old because it didn't have the air pockets on the inside of it. At Dakota High School the varsity football players get the first choice of helmets, then the junior varsity receive theirs, and finally the frosh-soph players get whatever helmets are left. By the time I received my helmet it was the only one left that would fit me."

"I can remember the weeks and months that followed my accident and how hard it was on my brothers, but for Mom and Dad things were extremely tough." Following Jeff's initial hospitalization, he returned to Rockford Memorial for numerous operations on his neck, back, hip, bladder, kidney and some plastic surgery. The one bright spot that came from this agonizing and traumatic situation occurred in 1978 when Jeff returned to Rockford Memorial for therapy and plastic surgery. He met a new registered nurse, Cathy Daugherty, who was working with rehabilitation patients. Jeff and Cathy fell in love and have been together ever since. Cathy still works at Rockford Memorial Hospital and commutes daily from their house in Davis.

Jeff and Cathy cannot get married because if they do he will lose all of his aid benefits. According to Jeff, this doesn't seem fair, but that's how the laws are written. Since Jeff receives only \$336 per

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month in the form of social security income, many times they are financially strapped with numerous bills. Two years ago when someone burned down Jeff's garage, he had to go to the bank to seek a loan to build a new garage. He used his electric wheel chair as collateral for the loan.

Before the football injury Jeff's dreams and plans were all centered around becoming a farmer or an automotive body specialist. But unfortunately for a quadriplegic this is not possible. Jeff finally managed to graduate from Dakota High School in 1978 but now wishes he had continued his education and gone on to college. When Cathy is working, Jeff passes the time by being very active in community activities. He serves as the Cub Scout master and the Webelo leader and also as an elected member of the Davis Village Board. He serves on the cemetery, finance and police committees and is chair of the Community Park Committee. His latest activity is learning to operate his new home computer.

### The Community and Friends Helped Us

"After my football accident the entire community helped us, people were very good to us. Many groups held benefits to assist my parents in raising enough money to build an addition to their house so they could properly care for me." Several groups in Rockford and Freeport, Illinois held benefits and auctions, a radio station participated as well as the Lakeside Bowling Alley at Lake Summerset. The bank in neighboring Rock City purchased a Minnesota Vikings jacket which was autographed by all the Viking players including Fran Tarkenton. Jeff received a game ball and an autographed football from the Chicago Bears during the 1975 season. Among the notable signatures on the autographed ball are the names Walter Payton and Jack Pardee. When Rockford's Boylan High School went downstate for the 1975 football playoffs, the entire team autographed a football and sent it to him in the hospital. Probably the most cherished and touching gesture for Jeff was the presentation of a Dakota High School letter jacket accompanied by an honorary membership for him in the high school's varsity club.

Following the accident Jeff's family was in contact with several attorneys who contemplated suing the school district but it was Jeff's wishes that they not subject the school to such an ordeal. However, litigation



Dr. Kent Kurtz (left) and Jeff Wishard who is a quadriplegic following a football injury in 1975 at Dakota High School. Because of Jeff's courage, personality, continued effort to help others and his enthusiasm for life, STMA has named a scholarship in his honor - "The Jeff Wishard Award"

against the helmet manufacturer is not a dead issue and may still be possible.

### Epilogue

It is unfortunate but one does not hear about football related injuries until someone gets seriously injured and then the media picks up on the others. In the case of Jeff Wishard, his injury seemed to bring more parents out to the Dakota football games during the fall of 1975. It may have stimulated a sense of concern or awareness to assure them of their sons' welfare or to make sure the students were receiving adequate instruction in good, sound football fundamentals.

Ironically, the maintenance and care of football fields in the northwest Illinois Conference have not been significantly upgraded or improved since Jeff's injury in 1975. Inspection of the Dakota High School football practice and game fields by the author in the summer of 1986 reveals the same hard and compacted surfaces as described by Jeff. Numerous annual and perennial grassy and broadleaf weeds abound and the maintenance program is geared to a weekly mowing. Irrigation, fertilization, aerification, weed control and the introduction of the new turf-type grasses is non-existent at Dakota High School. Due to the poor quality turf and rough, compacted field surfaces minor injuries and some more serious (broken legs and arms, broken knuckles, knee injuries and twisted ankles) continue at Dakota and other conference schools.

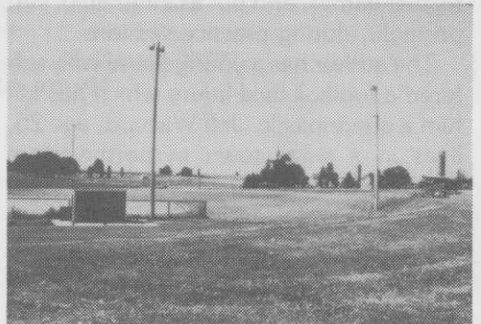
In 1976 (one year after Jeff Wishard was injured) a rule change went into effect which eliminated the head as a

primary and initial contact area for blocking and tackling.

In 1983 the Student Protection Trust Plan was initiated by the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFSHA). This plan is sponsored by NFSHA and all member state high school associations (i.e. the Illinois State High School Association). The Student Protection Trust Plan is a liability and no fault plan which can be purchased by all member schools. In Illinois all high schools have this policy.

The Student Protection Trust Plan supplements the medical plans taken out by parents above and beyond \$25,000. The injured student athlete can only receive benefits if his parents agree not to sue the school for negligence. The plan will pay for excess medical bills (above \$25,000) and will help on a one-time basis to outfit a van and equip the house for a catastrophic victim. Also if the injured athlete is unable to work it will provide a lifetime wage loss of up to \$300 per week. However, if the parents do not waive the right to sue, the plan will provide the school with an additional \$1,000,000 liability package.

Unfortunately, the Student Protection Trust Plan is not retroactive and athletes like Jeff Wishard who were injured prior to 1983 can derive no benefits from this plan.



Dakota High School football field and combination softball facility. Dakota is located in a rural northwestern Illinois area.

### Where Can One Turn For Assistance in Dealing With Athletic Field Injuries?

Two national organizations have pledged their energies and are making a concerted effort to reduce the incidence of sports field related injuries. Both your Sports Turf Manager's Association (STMA) and the national Sports Turf Council (NSTC) are working hard to provide knowledge and education to improve athletic field conditions throughout the United States, Canada, and other countries where sports turf is important.

STMA is making overt efforts to reach

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Sports Turf Manager's Association

personnel everywhere to become active STMA members. We need to join forces grounds supervisors and maintenance in combating unsafe athletic facilities by providing quality fields for the youth and athletes on every level of competition. It is STMA's far reaching goal to eventually have every elementary school, high school, 2-year and 4-year colleges, universities, park and municipal fields, professional stadiums and other allied facility managers join forces and energies to solve problems, learn more about new ideas and techniques and pool their efforts in further reducing severe athletic field related injuries in the community.

Efforts are underway for STMA to sponsor more one-day educational seminars, "hands on demonstrations" and mini-trade shows which have proven so valuable and successful in both Illinois and California. STMA plans to devote a portion of its annual conference which will be held at the Hyatt-Regency in Phoenix, Arizona January 31, 1987, to field safety problems and solutions (see related article). Everyone agrees that something must be done to curb athletic injuries but there are so many differing views and opinions on how to accomplish that feat.

STMA would like to learn more about the student protection trust plan initiated in 1983 by the National Federation of State High School Associations. Supposedly, this plan is intended to discourage lawsuits by providing lifetime financial coverage for catastrophically injured athletes. It is essential and long overdue for a mechanism to be created to assist and care for the severely injured athlete whether it's Jeff Wishard (high school) or Darryl Stingly (professional).

For quite some time equipment manufacturers have supported the establishment of a catastrophic injury foundation that would provide lifelong annuities for injured athletes. Several proposals have been discussed on ways to raise funds and channel money into such a foundation. One thought was to seek contributions from equipment manufacturers and another was to place a surcharge on athletic game tickets from high school level competition right up through the professional ranks. Such proposals have attracted some backing but generally the ideas have languished due to a lack of support and follow-through. The surcharge idea, which also might include a percentage of event parking revenue, might possibly be a means to raise funds to support research and education on field

safety advocated by STMA and NSTC. On the local level schools might place a surcharge on tickets and use the funds for improving their playing surfaces and for the purchase of seed, fertilizer and the proper equipment to maintain and care for a safe athletic field.

Your association, STMA, has long advocated that the simplest and easiest way to reduce injuries is to provide a well-turfed sports turf surface. A good quality natural grass sports field has a built in "forgiveness factor" which equates to a softer, more resilient safer surface. By selecting and using adapted turfgrass species, fertilizing correctly and often enough, providing adequate water for the turfgrass plant, mowing at frequent intervals and at the correct height, aerifying often, and topdressing to encourage deeper roots, a non-compact soil media and more resilient turfgrass cover will go a long way toward reducing sports related injuries.

### **What Has Been Done To Curb Injuries?**

Following a rash of serious injuries prior to 1975 and continuing through 1976, several major changes have been instituted through the cooperative efforts of the athletic community who were concerned with the safety of the participants. Mueller and Blythe<sup>3</sup> feel that catastrophic football injuries may never be completely eliminated but through on-going research the rules of football have changed, the equipment standards have been upgraded and the teaching of sound fundamental football techniques has improved. A united effort involving coaches, players, administrators, researchers, physicians, trainers and equipment manufacturers is required to identify the problems and then take the necessary preventative measures. Of prime importance is the disposition of old or worn football equipment which should either be properly renovated or discarded and not left for a player to risk serious injury.

On the positive side in the past few years there has been a reduction in permanent cervical cord injuries from football. According to Schneider<sup>1</sup> between the 1959 and 1963 seasons there were 30 serious cervical cord injuries while Torg<sup>2</sup> reported 99 between 1971 and 1975. In 1976 there were over 35 of these types of injuries; in 1979 there were 10, an average of 11.4 per year in the period from 1977 to 1983. However during the 1984 season only 6 permanent cervical injuries occurred.

Mueller and Schindler<sup>4</sup> list some of the

changes that have been implemented within recent years to reduce the severity and frequency of catastrophic injuries:

- 1.) Football players are instructed to use the shoulder to block and tackle and to keep the head out of football.
- 2.) Athletes must be given the proper conditioning exercises so they will hold their heads firmly erect when making contact with their opponent.
- 3.) Coaches and officials have pledged to discourage players from using their heads as battering rams when blocking and tackling. The spearing rule has been closely enforced and players are taught to respect their helmets as protective devices and not to be used as a weapon.
- 4.) Coaches, physicians and trainers have been instructed to take special care to make sure the player's equipment is properly fitted, particularly the helmet.
- 5.) It is essential that a medical physician be present during games and practices or at least advanced arrangements must be made to obtain the immediate services of a physician should a problem or emergency arise.
- 6.) Coaches need to be prepared for a possible catastrophic head or neck injury and know how to handle such an emergency.
- 7.) If a player experiences or shows signs of head trauma he should receive immediate medical attention and should not be allowed to return to the practice or game without a medical release.

### **References:**

- <sup>1</sup> Schneider, R.C. 1973. *Head and Neck Injuries in Football*, William and Wilkins Company, Baltimore.
- <sup>2</sup> Torg, J.S., Trues, R., Quedenfeld, T.C. et al. 1979. *The National Football Head and Neck Injury Registry*. JAMA 241: 1477-1479.
- <sup>3</sup> Mueller, F.O. and C.S. Blyth. 1985. *Annual Survey of Catastrophic Football Injuries 1977 to 1984*. National Collegiate Athletic Association and American Coaches Association.
- <sup>4</sup> Mueller, F.O. and R.D. Schindler. 1985. *Annual Survey of Football Injury Research 1931 to 1984*. National Collegiate Athletic Association and American Coaches Association.