POLO

PLAYERS' EDITION

August 2017

Bringing polo to the masses

$5.00 US/$5.50 Canada

POLO
PLAYERS' EDITION

CONTENTS

AUGUST 2017 VOL. 20, NO. 12

FEATURES

OUR COVER

'In your face' polo captivates 10,000 people at Tryon International Equestrian Center in North Carolina.

Photo by: Pam Gleason

DEPARTMENTS

Head strong

Recognizing and preventing concussions

With Dr. Jacklyn Casab

Polo can be a dangerous sport so injuries and falls should not be taken lightly, even if the injured player says he is fine.

Polo is a full contact, aggressive and competitive sport, which requires power, balance, skill, coordination, quick reflexes, decision making and strategy. The importance of safety for polo players is crucial and needs to be addressed in advance of play. Minimizing life-changing injuries, such as concussions, includes wearing a secure helmet.

U.S. Polo Association rules require a protective helmet or cap with a chin strap worn in a manner specified by the manufacturer, however, there are currently no requirements for meeting specific safety standards.

Polo is considered a high-risk sport, but there is a paucity of studies regarding injuries, such as concussion. Apparently, one study showed the incidence of injury at 7.8 per 1,000 playing hours, however, 64 percent of these injuries were considered serious. Arm and head injuries were most common and were frequently associated with falls.

Sports-Related Concussions

Sports-related concussions have impacted an estimated 300,000 to 3.8 million people annually in the United States. Concussions are a major cause of death and disability, and 153 people every day in the U.S. die from head injuries. Many people who experience a concussion can face effects that last a few days, or the rest of their lives. The effects of concussions can include impaired thinking or memory, movement, sensation or emotional functioning.

Preventing concussions for polo players starts with buying the safest helmet available. Polo helmets last, at most, five years, and should be replaced after a fall regardless if damage to the helmet is visible. Most importantly, a polo player's helmet needs to fit correctly in order to provide maximum protection. Every three months, polo players should check their helmets, as straps stretch out, padding settles and the fit changes. Always follow your helmet manufacturers recommendations for proper fit.

Signs of Concussion

- Can't recall events prior to or after a hit or fall
- Appears dazed or stunned
- Forgets an instruction, is confused about an assignment or position, or is unsure of the game score or opponent
- Moves clumsily
- Answers questions slowly
- Loses consciousness
- Shows mood, behavior or personality changes

Symptoms Reported

- Headache or pressure in head
- Nausea or vomiting
- Balance problems or dizziness, or double vision
- Bothered by light or noise
- Feeling sluggish, hazy, foggy or groggy
- Confusion, or concentration or memory problems
- Just not 'feeling right' or 'feeling down'

– Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Equestrian-Related Concussions

Horseback riding is one of the leading sports that result in the most traumatic brain injuries. In the United States, approximately 30 million Americans ride horses each year for both recreational and competitive sports. Data from the National Trauma Databank between 2003-2012 found that equestrian sports contributed to the highest percentage of traumatic brain injuries for adults.

According to the Department of Neurological Surgery, concussions comprise 9.7 to 15 percent of all equestrian-related injuries brought to hospitals for evaluation. The study also identified how 9-25 percent of horseback riders don't use helmets, increasing their risk of a brain injury. Equestrian athletes who wear helmets led to an absolute risk reduction for head injury of 40 to 50 percent.

Concussion Issues and Concerns

The first concern focuses on the use of the safest helmet available, which should be worn at all times (on and off the polo field) and be replaced immediately after an impact has occurred.

In 2011, Neurosurgeon Lola B. Chambless analyzed ASTM (American Society for Testing and Materials)/SEI (Safety Equipment Institute) and NOCSAE (National Operating Committee on Standards for Athletic Equipment) helmet standards and determined the NOCSAE standard to be safer for polo based on conditions specific to the sport, such as being hit by a polo ball or mallet, in addition to dangers associated with riding. The USPA had hoped to require

SERGIO LLAMERA

No one is immune from falls and the more you ride, the more likely your are to fall. Wear the safest helmet available any time you are on a horse, replace it after a fall and don't get back on if you have a concussion.

players to wear NOCSAE-approved helmets, but this proved more complicated than expected. Only two polo helmets passed the standard and neither are being manufactured today.

Due to high costs to test and manufacture, and the unlikelihood of making a return on investment, no polo helmet manufacturer seems willing to try to meet the NOSCAE standard, understandably so.

With this in mind, the USPA is looking at requiring participants to wear helmets that are ASTM certified, the standard used by the United States Equestrian Federation for its members, as an alternative. The USPA is continuing to test helmets and hopes to see a variety of helmets eventually meet the ASTM standard. An initial round of tests last summer saw half of the eight helmet models from five manufacturers pass some ASTM tests, however the full range of tests were not performed. USPA testing continues and once completed, the results will be made available to USPA members so they can be informed when purchasing a helmet.

Since horses are unpredictable, it is inevitable that an individual will fall off at some point during the course of a riding career. Even with a helmet, the chances of suffering a concussion are good; without it, the chances of severe concussion increase significantly.

The second issue is the lack of standardized concussion protocols, even at larger competitions. Typically, there are not trained medical personnel on site during smaller competitions. Therefore, unless the concussion injury is so severe that hospitalization is a given, many riders just get back up and ride.

Furthermore, at the more prominent competitions, where an emergency medical technician is typically present, there is still a lack of a standardized concussion protocol that is utilized and enforced. This leaves the decision up to the EMT whether to check for concussion or not, which does not always happen as it should. This also leads to a lack of follow-through to ensure the rider does not just get right back in the saddle again, which tends to be the rider's first inclination.

Getting back on the horse after a fall resulting in a concussion puts the rider at real risk of severe brain injury. The most effective way of preventing severe brain injury is by allowing the previous injury to fully heal.

According to Dr. Chambless, if a rider is clear of any other serious injuries, he should expect to rest and not return to athletic activity until all symptoms of the concussion have resolved. For 88 percent of athletes, this will occur within a week of the accident. Once the rider is symptom-free, he should return first to moderate activity (walking) before engaging in aerobic activity (running, biking, etc.) If no symptoms have recurred, he can then return to riding in a step-wise fashion, slowly increasing the intensity of activity over several days. If at any point during this period his concussive symptoms return, he should take more time out to rest. In addition, physicians who are experienced in treating traumatic brain injury can perform balance and neurocognitive testing, to help athletes determine their fitness for return.

Conclusion

Polo, equestrian and other sports-related concussion numbers are growing each year, and more formalized studies of the incidence of concussion would enhance player involvement. Studies have concluded that most equestrian athletes are either misinformed or unaware of the potential negative consequences of concussive injuries.

This is an issue that not only affects individual athletes, it also affects families and communities as a whole. The need for education is evident, and efforts should address the risks, signs, symptoms, guidelines and appropriate management of concussions.

With improved protocols and sports injury prevention, equestrian sports will ultimately be safer for all who are involved. ◆