

CONCUSSION- A MOTHER'S EXPERIENCE

Press reports about the new headgear called N-Pro have been a hot topic in my family over the past couple of weeks. I was particularly grateful to read our own Steve Grainger's notice on the Lancashire Rugby website. Steve advised us that as this new headgear did not currently meet World Rugby specifications and is currently under evaluation, it could not be used in our matches until further notice.

Some of you might recall a small article I wrote earlier this year entitled "Why I Allow My Son To Play Rugby" - which attracted great interest at a time when rugby was being criticised for allowing tackling at an early age.

As a firm believer in fate I should have perhaps seen this coming but as this year draws to a close I thought the Gods had overlooked testing my opinions. I was wrong.

One of the rugby highlights at my son's school is the Year 10 (age 14/15 or 4th year to those of us of a certain age) Rugby Tour to Venice in Italy. A week of pasta, pizza, ice cream AND plenty of rugby had my son and his friends rubbing their hands with glee. Off he went with firm instructions from me as to staying and playing safe. The accompanying teachers and coaches were highly competent, the trip was well organised and I looked forward to a week of catching up at home and work before the mountain of smelly rugby kit and beloved son arrived home again.

The first game went well with a win for our boys - I was even treated to a rare text home saying he had got a try in the first 5 minutes and was having a whale of a time. Game 2 was to be held in the Prosecco hills (envious - me ?) and some photos on the school Twitter account indicated that they were indeed in fine rugby playing country.

Then the nightmare began.

A short note on Twitter saying the team were struggling in Game 2 due to several injuries and the maternal radar went into action. This was followed by a text that evening saying my son had been injured and left the field of play. He was one of 2 serious concussion injuries. He had gone in for a tackle and his head had met the knee of the opposing Italian player. Both players had been injured. Apparently he got up, tried to continue and then fell over. Out cold.

No word from the boy that evening but it was good to know that his room mate and teachers were keeping a very careful eye on him. I had a strong word with myself - and failed miserably.

The time for me from Thursday evening until collecting him off the coach at school on Friday afternoon is a sleepless blur. The son I collected showed no emotion whatsoever and his eyes were dull - no "hi Mum - Ive had a great time!" no hug, nothing - he just went up to bed. I spent the evening covertly watching him and checking on him more than I ever did when he was a baby. The following day he lay on the sofa with the blinds drawn and told me off for asking too many questions. He couldn't remember the flight home. By this time his father and I were making arrangements for him to be seen by a Doctor - fast.

We are fortunate to have an excellent Urgent Care Centre at Chorley Hospital which employs a fellow rugby mum whose son had also been on the Tour. She had heard from her

son what had happened and handled both of us with great care and understanding. After a few basic checks the decision was made to conduct a brain scan to check for a bleed on the brain. No reaction from my son - and my own horrified reaction had to be quickly disguised with a brisk smile and squeeze of his arm.

Sitting alone outside X Ray whilst your child has a brain scan is an event I don't wish to repeat or have any one of you experience. It was the point at which I first seriously questioned us allowing him to play rugby. The relief when I was informed that there was no bleed was profound. A rugby loving Glaswegian Doctor asked for his autograph as he said if my son could play Prop at his size and weight he must be good. Still nothing.

Home we went to 3 days off school with a bruised ear and a cracking headache. The opposite sofa to him became my office. I watched him sway every time he stood up, ricochet off walls when walking and go off his food. A simple (but deliberate) request to bring 2 items down stairs for me was beyond him. Concentration was poor - and unusual bad temper and frustration now surfaced. One of his fellow rugby fanatics visited - still no enthusiasm, which shook his friend up somewhat. His Great Aunt telephoned in high dudgeon to tell me in no uncertain terms I was to forbid him to play rugby ever again. His response was unprintable.

Having taken myself to a RFU Concussion Awareness training session earlier this year I knew that none of this was unusual. The difference was it was now very very real.

What kept us going was the numerous messages of love and support we received from School and Club. The Rugby Family gathered round. We even had messages from Italy.

I am pleased to report that 2 weeks after the accident he is recovering well - as is the other lad with concussion. The sarcastic sense of humour has returned ... along with the appetite. I suggested the "reciting the alphabet backwards test" and was told "Behave Mum- I can't do that anyway!". Interestingly not once has he challenged the RFU 3 week match ban.

On Sunday evening his father and I sat down with him and we went through what had happened. We discovered that he had made a split second decision on the tackle that had resulted in his head being on the wrong side of the player. I was informed in no uncertain terms that it had absolutely nothing to do with him playing Prop- it had happened in open play not the scrum. He was glad we have always insisted on head gear and mouth guard being worn as his ear had been protected from further damage. The family copy of Rugby Union for Dummies was opened and he was advised to re-read the chapter on tackling. There was no scoffing that he knew how to tackle - much to my relief because I think his father would have told him in no uncertain terms that he plainly didn't. He was told to stop making the macho monster tackles and focus on his technique. As you can imagine that didn't go down well with a lad who prides himself on being a bit of a giant slayer. The offer of a balance and fitness test this week by a Club fitness coach however was gratefully accepted. He admitted that the entire episode had scared him and he never wanted it to happen again.

Which brings me back to the new head gear. If I thought for one minute that the purchase of such an item could have prevented this concussion I would have bought one immediately. But the fact is this - the wearing of any head gear does not prevent concussion. Rugby as we all know is a contact sport. Injuries happen - but what we should be shining the spotlight on is risk management. If our children are old enough to tackle

they are old enough to understand the risks. This is why the RFU Headcase Awareness programme is so vitally important.

The personal learning for my son - which we are both happy to share with you all - has been as follows:

- Technique - don't become unconsciously incompetent- there is always room to improve, no-one is an expert
- Practice practice practice- so that when you are faced with a split second decision in a match the right move is made instinctively each and every time
- Take direction from trained coaching staff - ask questions and learn from their experience and advice
- Wearing head gear does not make you immune from injury
- Don't think you can make the same tackles at 14 as an adult professional player.
- This is not X box or You Tube - this is flesh and blood reality
- Concussion hurts everyone around you - you owe it to us to stay as safe as possible

So there we are. What an experience we have had. Lets get the message out there rugby family and keep our precious players safe.

Jayne Dolloway