Editorial: Health, safety - Goals clear for protecting teen athletes

Monday, October 13, 2008

Last month’s death of JaQuan Waller, a 16-year-old running back at J.H. Rose, sounded the most recent alarm about safety precautions protecting high school athletes. His was the seventh football-related death nationwide and third in North Carolina this year.

In response, some propose requiring North Carolina high schools to employ licensed athletic trainers in order to field teams in contact sports like football. While that may represent an excessive response to these emotional losses, the proposal does demand serious consideration in light of these tragic deaths.

Waller collapsed during a Sept. 19 football game in Greenville after taking a ball-jarring tackle in the second quarter. He was rushed to Pitt County Memorial Hospital and died the next day from what the State Medical Examiner termed “second impact syndrome.” The teenager was injured days earlier during a practice and examined three times prior to his death, but did not see a licensed athletic trainer or a physician before returning to the field.

Pitt County Schools last week indefinitely suspended Bill Grimm, Rose’s first responder and the man who examined Waller. Grimm began working in sports medicine in 1966, and he served D.H. Conley and North Pitt high schools before landing at Rose for the past six years. Grimm is a man with extensive experience in this field, though he is not a licensed athletic trainer.

North Carolina requires high schools to have a licensed trainer or a first responder on staff, a mandate of particular importance for football. The sport involves violent collisions, and players accept the possibility of injury whenever they step on the field. Extensive precautions are taken to protect their health and safety.

But present-day high school football players are bigger, faster and stronger than ever, making the likelihood of injury greater. The number of deaths in North Carolina, two of which came from head injury, may be an anomaly or could be indicative of a trend that merits alarm and action.

At a meeting of the North Carolina High School Athletic Association’s Sports Medicine Committee last week, an expert on concussions advocated a statewide mandate to require schools to have a licensed athletic trainer on staff. Dr. Kevin Guskiewicz, director of the Sports Medicine Research Laboratory and Undergraduate Athletic Training Education Program at UNC-Chapel Hill, said schools without should be prohibited from fielding teams in some sports.

That may be an overreaching response, but it warrants serious examination and discussion. North Carolina must take seriously its responsibility to protect these teenagers and consider any solution to prevent another untimely death.
Letter: Programs stop increase in youth obesity

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Alice Keene and Donna Ware presented the Eat Smart Move More initiatives in the Pitt County schools to the school board on Oct. 6.

They highlighted that we have a significant childhood obesity problem in Pitt County, but the good news is that partnerships with ECU, the Brody School of Medicine, the Pitt County Health Department, ViQuest and Pitt County Memorial Hospital have stopped the increase in obesity among elementary and middle school kids. The partnerships have brought more than $2 million to the county schools to pilot and then extend successful projects to all schools. Much of that money has come from the Pitt Memorial Hospital Foundation.

Since we know what works, it is critical that we sustain these efforts. Most of us understand that it is easy to regain weight lost if you don't continue to pay attention to the food and beverages you consume and the physical activity you do. Kudos to all those who have been involved. Pitt County Schools needs a staff wellness program and a full-time registered dietitian, in addition to the programs that have made healthy eating and physical activity a part of the educational program in our schools.

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Letter: Breast cancer not the only worthy cause

Monday, October 13, 2008

Something in our society has got to change. Last month, September, was Thyroid Cancer Awareness Month. Thyroid cancer is the fastest growing cancer with respect to population. What in our society was done to raise awareness of this important cancer?

October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and it is quite obvious if you go anywhere. A fair majority of things are pink. I mean no offense to anyone who has had, has or knows anyone with breast cancer. In fact, my grandmother and aunt are breast cancer survivors. But quite frankly, breast cancer does not have the highest rate of diagnosis. Breast cancer does not have the highest death rate. Breast cancer is not the cancer that has the highest rate of increase in our society. So explain to me why our society seems to put such high importance on it? I find nothing wrong with the fact that we are passionate about fighting cancer as a society, but why are we sending the message of it just being breast cancer?

I do not walk into places and see pearl color everywhere for lung cancer in November, or brown on food packages in stores in March for colon cancer. Why?

They are just as prevalent, affecting thousands of Americans every year. But I still continue to see pink ribbons and no other colors.

I am quite ashamed for our society. In 2007, lung cancer affected approximately 30,000 more Americans than breast cancer. Yet breast cancer awareness and help sites have more than 3 million more hits on Google than lung cancer.

Let's get some things straight America: Either decrease the overflow of pink support items, or increase awareness for other cancers.

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Why blue books for exams? Why not laptops? Discuss

ERIC FERRERI, Staff Writer
Comment on this story

CHAPEL HILL - College students communicate with text messages clicked out on cell phones. They take class notes on their laptops. Yet, when they take an American history exam, they do what students a generation earlier did: They scribble in a blue book, pausing only to grimace and shake a cramping hand.

The blue book is widely loathed by students, who must be coherent without the benefit of a backspace key, and by professors, who must fight through a jungle of bad cursive. But no technology has managed to displace it. Now, UNC-Chapel Hill is trying to relegate the venerable school supply to the academic dustbin with a computer program.

So far, the blue book retains the upper hand.

A couple of dozen UNC professors are using the word-processing software called Secureexam, which locks all other applications on a student's computer so there's no way to cheat. Each exam is encrypted and cannot be reopened once the student completes it, unless the professor OKs it.

"They can't surf the Web," said Andy Lang, director of information services within UNC-CH's College of Arts and Sciences. "All wired and wireless connections are shut off."

The college is spending about $30,000 a year on the software, and last semester about 1,000 students took exams with it, Lang said.

Joseph Wittig, who teaches medieval British literature at UNC-CH, is using the Secureexam software and loves it.

"I can read and grade 40 exams in one full day," he said, adding that with blue books that task takes two to three times as long. "At a certain point, you'd start skimming because you're worn out. It's a huge advantage for students and teachers."

The software was cheered recently in a Daily Tar Heel editorial that read in part: "This isn't 1860. We don't have to scrawl out long-winded treatises by hand anymore. We have these things called computers that allow you to type fast enough to keep up with your thoughts."
But, like the cockroach, the blue book persists.

Only about 25 to 30 UNC professors use the new software. That's a small percentage of the faculty, though Lang said the product is gaining popularity.

Ready ... write

Professors say the blue books are still here because, well, they've always been here. But most would readily move to a new technology if the transition were easy, said Ed Neal, the now-retired former director for faculty development programs with UNC-CH's Center for Faculty Excellence. If nothing else, the blue book is simple. Open, write, close. There are no logins or passwords.

At one blue book manufacturer, demand for the product is actually increasing. Despite technology and its promise of a paper-free future, Comet School Supplies Inc. of Palestine, Texas, keeps churning out the blue books -- as well as a green book version using recycled paper, said Don Howard, the company's operations director. Neither automated multiple-choice tests nor the Internet's vast stores of information have dented his trade, Howard said.

"We all heard that we're going to save all that paper," he said. "And that didn't happen."

Despite their old-world aspect, the blue books provide an odd comfort to students wary of changing their routine.

"I prefer to write, quite honestly," said Todd Dalrymple, a UNC-Chapel Hill senior from Virginia. "It's a simple method. It's just the way I've learned to take a test."

Learning to think

Whether written in blue books or typed onto laptops, the essay likely isn't going anywhere. It is an accepted form of testing the world over, though in some places -- like many European nations -- most are still handwritten and students aren't timed, Neal said. Writing teaches critical thinking and encourages organized thought, though Neal has argued for years against written final exams squeezed into two- or three-hour time slots. In the real world, there is little occasion to write a timed essay, Neal points out; but you are expected to write thorough, cogent memos and reports.

"I would advocate very difficult take-home essays," he said. "As far as I'm concerned, the only reason to go to college is to learn to think."

And writing by hand demands that students plan their words, Neal said. Students can get lazy with the cut-and-paste option.

"Writing longhand is valuable because it slows you down," he said. "[When typing], it's too easy just to pour out trash."

Still, Securexam is gaining momentum by appealing to professors tired of squinting at scrawl that has only grown worse as young people type more and write less. The software manufacturer, the Cambridge, Mass.-based Software Secure, Inc., has 150 clients including UNC-CH and Meredith College. The software lends itself to courses heavy on writing. N.C. State, with its healthy dose of quantitative courses, doesn't use it.

Wittig, the literature professor, believes students can express themselves more clearly by typing their exams. "They can write more, and more confidently," he said. "And I can read what they're saying, rather than fight their handwriting."

There are glitches. Andrew Phillips, a UNC-CH freshman from Chapel Hill, suffered through a public policy exam this semester in a huge auditorium with spotty Web access and far too few power outlets. "It was basically a train wreck," he said.
UNC-CH senior Matt Martell’s only problem with this new sort of test-taking is the distraction created by hundreds of students typing at once.

"If you have a lecture class with 300 students, the noise is just going to be incredible," he said. "I tend to hit my enter key or my space bar a little bit loud. It's not soothing at all."

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