

Ethan Alter | Time to consider helmets in W. Lax

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Junior Maddie Poplawski suffered a concussion earlier this season that took her out of Penn's lineup. Helmets would help prevent head injuries like Poplawski's.

Is it possible that for women's lacrosse, the best protection is no protection at all?

Such is the conventional wisdom held at US Lacrosse, the governing body for the college and high-school game, regarding women's lacrosse. Unlike the more violent men's game, where helmets are required, protective helmets are forbidden in the women's game.

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Though women's lacrosse has long been played sans helmets, the sport has faced increased scrutiny in recent years for rising concussion rates. According to the Center for Injury Research and Policy, girls' lacrosse — featuring players in high school and younger — has the highest concussion rate of any girls' sport.

So why ban helmets in the game? Representatives and literature from US Lacrosse have repeatedly stressed that helmets are not the “silver bullet” that many are hoping for. They have even said the introduction of helmets would be a net negative by way of encouraging a more violent game. Traditionalists also speak of balancing safety with maintaining the “integrity” of the sport.

The Penn women's lacrosse team has dealt with its share of concussions this year. Star midfielder Maddie Poplawski missed time earlier this season after sustaining one. Sophomore defender Lydia Miller did too. The Penn women's team was not available for comment.

Horror stories of young women missing months of school and suffering long-lasting memory issues abound, but one statistic seems particularly salient regarding just how safe the women's game currently is.

In-game concussion rates in women's lacrosse are only 15-percent lower than the much rougher male counterpart. For some added perspective, women's lacrosse is considered a non-contact sport, while men's lacrosse is a full-contact sport.

Despite pleas from parents and several concussion specialists, US Lacrosse has resisted calls to test helmets in women's lacrosse. Its central point is that if everybody plays by the rules, physical plays and sticks to the head can be all but eliminated from contests. As such, the governing body has chosen to focus its efforts on improving coaching and officiating, so that girls will learn to play a safer brand of lacrosse.

One major flaw in that argument is that many of the worst concussions and head injuries have come from accidental blows to head, whether from a stick on a shot follow-through or a ball to the head. There is little doubt that hard helmets would prevent or at least mitigate the head trauma stemming from these blows.

With increased knowledge about the mal-effects of concussions on young athletes, the focus for US Lacrosse must be on safety. Maintaining the “integrity” of the sport is tremendously important to some people, but it cannot come before maximizing the athletes' safety.

The argument that introducing helmets into the women's game would prove to be a net negative is slightly more compelling, but not by much. Hard helmets, coupled with existing initiatives for tighter officiating, can reduce both number and severity of concussions suffered in-game.

If the priority, as it should be, is keeping players safe, US Lacrosse cannot continue to deny the helmet as a viable option for women's lacrosse.

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