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More safety gear urged for young ballplayers

Study fuels discussion about keeping games safe

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Christy Collins' vision for the future of baseball can be glimpsed through the polycarbonate bars of a face mask.

The Ohio researcher examined data from dozens of high school teams and concluded that the best way to reduce serious injuries on the diamond would be to require that all infielders, from pitchers to shortstops, wear helmets and face protection.

Her suggestion, published Monday in the journal *Pediatrics*, would mean a huge change in the game's gear.

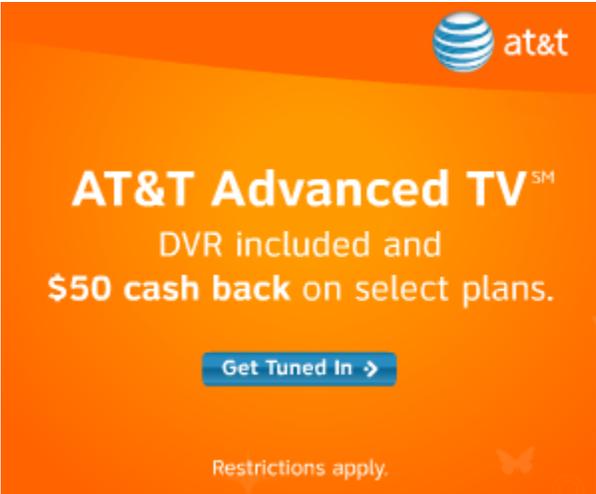
Few think the idea will come to pass soon—if ever—but it has become part of a larger discussion about safety in America's pastime, where a long-held culture of toughness is slowly giving way to more cautious attitudes.

Major League Baseball's general managers, for instance, required first- and third-base coaches to wear helmets beginning this season, following the July death of minor-league coach Mike Coolbaugh.

"To have a starting pitcher wear a helmet the whole time could be a burden, but you have to weigh the pros and cons and the dangers of being hit in the head," said Mike Napoleon, head coach at New Trier High School. "Does it happen enough [to warrant a helmet]? I don't know. I haven't seen it happen, but one time might be enough."

Baseball is among the safest high school sports, with a total injury rate well below that of football and even soccer. But when it comes to serious harm, a 2000 study showed that it trails only wrestling for injuries that keep players sidelined for a week or more.

As part of a wider survey on sports injuries, Collins, a researcher at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, looked at two seasons of high school trainers' reports. She found that extreme injuries—fractures, concussions and dental damage—were more likely to afflict players who had been hit by a batted ball.



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"It can be pretty costly to treat head and face injuries," she said, "as well as having an impact on the player—keeping them out of play, changing their outlook on sports. . . . Sports are one of the major ways kids can have a physically fit and healthy lifestyle. If a player sustains an injury, they may quit in the long term, and we definitely don't want that to happen."

Though some have tried curbing those injuries by limiting the size of bats or allowing only wooden ones, Collins said the best defense would be for all infielders to sport helmets and face shields, or at least mouth guards and protective eye wear. She speculated that the same advice would benefit younger athletes, who play on smaller fields and whose reflexes aren't as sharp.

Little interest

However, baseball players interested in wearing the equipment seem as rare as a Honus Wagner baseball card.

"I don't think [mandatory headgear] would ever happen," said Bobby Lyne, a pitcher at Carmel Catholic High School who has been struck in the chest by a line drive. "If the pros aren't going to do it, I don't think they'd go through with it at the high school level."

Protective equipment for fielders is slightly more common among younger children.

Downers Grove Youth Baseball requires T-ball players who stand on the pitcher's mound to wear helmets, and Tim Bruns, a board member with Hillside Youth Baseball, said he occasionally sees players wearing mouth guards, though they are not mandatory.

Little League Baseball, whose rules govern more than 2 million players in the U.S., doesn't require any of the equipment Collins encourages, though the group said knee and ankle injuries prompted it to switch this year to "safety bases," which dislodge when players slide into them.

Fast-pitch softball has upgraded its safety equipment in recent years by requiring batters to wear helmets with masks, after players too often fouled rising pitches off their faces.

Kelly McKeown, spokesman for the Amateur Softball Association, said the Oklahoma City-based organization has not considered mandating masks for infielders, but it seems to be catching on anyway.

Choosing to wear a mask

New Trier sophomore Kelsey Lee had the "scariest experience of [her] life" two summers ago when a line drive struck a teammate in the face while she was pitching. Now both players wear protective face masks when pitching.

"At first, it took a while to get used to it," Lee said. "I didn't want to pitch with a plastic mask over my face, but now I think it's the greatest thing. I feel so safe out there."

The players believe in the masks so strongly that they recently spoke to the board of the Trevian Girls Softball Association about making the gear mandatory for all pitchers in the North Shore club.

Deerfield Youth Baseball and Softball recently required pitchers on the elite softball travel team to wear face masks and is considering including first and third basemen—fielders who also can play

dangerously close to the plate.

But Commissioner Harry Steindler said the group hasn't contemplated similar rules for baseball. While that's partly due to differences in the games—softball is played on a smaller field—old-fashioned attitudes also play a role.

"Dads are mostly the ones involved in softball, and they're a little more protective of the girls," he said. "For baseball, we all think of ourselves playing as kids and think, 'We didn't need it.' Progress will be a little slower on the baseball side."

But change came in a hurry for Xander Horwitz, 13. The Deerfield baseball player suffered a fractured eye socket two weeks ago when he lost a throw in the lights. His father decreed that before Xander could set foot on the diamond again, he would have to wear a face mask.

'I got used to it'

Xander swiftly agreed.

"It wasn't a big decision," he said. "I really wanted to play. I didn't really care [about the mask] as long as I played in the field. After the first game I got used to it and it's not that big of a deal anymore. I have to adjust it and it gets a little sweaty, but it's fine."

Collins, the researcher, said further study is needed to understand why most players seem hesitant to adopt the gear, though Jordan Siversten, a pitcher at Carmel, said the reason was simple.

"I think it's ridiculous," he said. "I would feel weird out there wearing it."

Kathleen Kalant has no sympathy for that viewpoint. Three years ago, her son Bill, then a 16-year-old pitcher at Oak Lawn High School, took a line drive to the right side of his head.

Bill Kalant remembers walking off the field laughing and thinking it didn't hurt much, but within minutes he passed out. Doctors performed brain surgery and put him in a drug-induced coma for nearly two weeks. He spent four months in rehabilitation, and though he's still mending, he has recovered enough to attend Moraine Valley Community College.

However, he probably will never play baseball again.

"They all should wear [helmets and face masks], whether they're 5 or 55," Kathleen Kalant said. "If you're playing a baseball game, you need protective eye and headgear. You may think you look like a bunch of fools out there, but it's for your own good."

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