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Living Well: Youth baseball injury stats: Ouch!

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SPECIAL TO THE P-I

No doubt the Little League bleachers are buzzing in Wayne, N.J., and just about any youth baseball diamond that learns about a May 19 lawsuit filed by the Domalewski family.

The New Jersey parents of former pitcher Steven Domalewski sued bat manufacturer Hillerich & Bradsby Co., plus the official Little League organization and the retail outlet Sports Authority, after their then-12-year-old son was struck by a batted ball right above the heart while he was on the mound during a 2006 game.

Steven suffered brain damage from the blow. His heart stopped beating and doctors estimate his brain was deprived of oxygen for about 15 to 20 minutes.

The bat in question was a 31-inch, 19-ounce Louisville Slugger TPX Platinum model. The filing attorney claimed the defendants knew, or should have known, the bat could potentially injure youth players not ready for the velocity of a batted ball coming off this particular make of aluminum bat. A major premise in the suit is that aluminum bats cause the ball to travel faster than wooden bats.

Not surprisingly, legal blogs are robust with comments about whether this is a legitimate or frivolous lawsuit.

Pause. Debate among your own brain synapses. OK, back to the column.

Little League Baseball has denied any wrongdoing. The game in which Steven Domalewski sustained the injury was a Police Athletic League contest rather than a Little League event. Attorney Ernest Fronzuto countered that Little League Baseball officially approved the bat and by its actions led players, coaches and parents to believe the bat was safe for play among 10-, 11- and 12-year-olds.

Fronzuto told The Associated Press he sees this case as raising public awareness about whether youth baseball is safe or if there are precautions that would help protect children.

As it happens, researchers at the Center for Injury Research and Policy at the Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio, are releasing a study Monday almost squarely on the subject.

Dawn Comstock, a Ph.D. faculty member at The Ohio State University's College of Public Health, has long staked youth sports injuries as her research focus. She and colleague Christy Collins published a study in the June edition of the medical journal *Pediatrics* that analyzes injuries in high school baseball in the past three seasons, from 2005 through 2007.

The study is the most comprehensive look at high school baseball in the past 10 years and "the first to examine all injuries attributed to being hit by a batted ball at the high school level," wrote journal

editors.

While high school baseball has a relatively low rate of injury compared to other sports -- Comstock and Collins are in the midst of comparing nine different sports -- it has the largest proportion of fractures (even more than football) and second-largest proportion of injuries that resulted in a time loss of more than seven days (trailing only boys' soccer).

More than 11 percent of all baseball injuries are caused by a batted ball. Collins said the majority of those injuries, 64 percent, involve the head, face or teeth. Line drives to the chest did not represent a significant incidence level in the high school study. Collins, clearly not intending to directly comment on the New Jersey lawsuit, suggested that high school players are likely to be more coordinated and "better able to shield themselves from the ball and get their gloves up."

Nonetheless, the authors of the study documented severe enough injuries to the head and teeth to recommend that all pitchers and infielders "wear helmets with face shields (a bar to protect but not disrupt vision) or at least mouth guards and eye protection."

Collins acknowledged that any such protective gear is not part of the baseball mind-set.

"We know that mouth guards, face shields and eye protection are proven to be successful," Collins said. "We plan to conduct research on why this protective equipment is not worn, whether it is because coaches and parents are not aware of the equipment or whether it is not part of the culture of the sport."

The temptation is to think more the latter, that adults are just not ready for infielders in helmets with face bars chomping on mouth guards. Infielder chatter might go a bit mushy, among other things. But it doesn't take too many bloody lips or close calls to the eye socket of novice players to reconsider the use of protective gear. Pitchers wearing flak jackets or other chest protectors seems excessive, though the guess here is that might be less a stretch in Wayne, N.J.

"Mouth guards are much more commonly worn in basketball these days, especially here in Ohio where we all watch (Cleveland Cavaliers star) LeBron James always wear one," said Collins. "There are more youth softball leagues in which pitchers wear helmets. Compared to other sports, baseball is reluctant to change. But even a dental injury, which can be costly for parents, has a permanent effect on a child's life. Lots of those teeth don't grow back."

Bob Condor writes about health and quality of life every Monday. You can send him ideas or questions at bobcondor@aol.com.

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