

16 Responsibility in the fog of concussions

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January 15, 2015 — ROCKVILLE CENTRE HERALD

When brains rattle, blame is cast in the dark.

Concussions are a permanent risk factor in football. Players put on their helmets as doctors and trainers try to pull back the reins on injuries. A swirl of factors are involved in deciding who's responsible for athletes' safety.

In 2013, eight high school football players died from concussions. The National Federation of State High School Associations has been spearheading a nationwide initiative to reduce brain trauma in high school football.

Athletes whose helmets come off mid-game must leave the field until the helmet is securely fitted. Players suspected of having sustained a concussion must be symptom-free for 24 hours and present a doctor's note to play. Schools are also teaching safer techniques like tackling with the hands instead of the head.

"Our athletes are instructed how to properly tackle, as well as how to receive a hit in an effort to minimize injury," said Carol Roseto, the Rockville Centre School District athletic director.

Ronald Denig was taught the "old school" way to play — duck and charge. A former champion for the Newfield High School football team, the 21-year-old knows a thing or two about concussions: he's had more of them than he can accurately recall. As a linebacker, his gritty, hard-charging style distinguished him.

"I only played one way," Denig said. "That's what made me good. That's what made me be able to get to the next level. I don't know if I would have had the wits to be like, 'OK, playing this type of game isn't good, maybe I should be more of a finesse player instead.' I probably wouldn't have done that though."

Denig's worst concussion came in 11th grade. "The game probably ended at like

three and I remember for the rest of the day to the next morning I couldn't get off my couch because I was so dizzy and my head hurt so bad," he said. "I was very concussed after that game and I didn't get it diagnosed because I knew if I got it diagnosed, I would be out for like a month or two and we were in the middle of the season. I was just trying to tough it out. I was being an idiot."

As the team physician for the Miller Place High School football team, Dr. Mark Harary tries to put himself in the players' shoes.

"There's definitely a different mindset when you're a teenager or a young athlete," said Harary. "You have a sense of invincibility that as you get older you realize from your mistakes that's not the case. A lot of times you have to rely on your experiences and also the parents to set the example for the kids to make them understand that it's just a sport, it's just a game, there's a lot more important things in life outside of it."

Michael Lisi, 22, suffered a concussion during practice with the Stony Brook University football team in April 2014. The offensive lineman returned to the field four months later, despite the dangers of the sport he's played since he was four. His generation had advocated rough tackles, jeopardizing athletes' safety.

"It's natural sometimes to put your head down and hit somebody," Lisi said. "But they're slowly making a transition to a safer game for sure."

For Denig, who left the sport two years ago, it came down to putting his health above athletic obligations.

"I feel like today, athletes should be more responsible," said Denig. "They should definitely listen to themselves a lot more and not feel as pressured from coaches, fans, the community or bosses to go out and play because at the end of the day, it's your body. You only get one."



Photo courtesy Ronald Denig

RONALD DENIG, wearing number five for Newfield High School, lunged to tackle a player from Comsewogue High School.



A SOUTH SIDE HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL PLAYER landed head-first on the turf in the 2014 Homecoming game against Herricks High School.

Photos courtesy Ronald Denig

Margaritaville returns to Rockville Centre

A little bit of Key West is coming to Rockville Centre to help warm the coldest days of winter. The 7th annual Enchanted Winterland will be holding a second "Margaritaville Evening" on Saturday, Jan. 31 at 7 p.m. at the St. Agnes Parish Center. This year's honorees will be the Wohlfarth Family of Front Street Bakery.

Pull out your flip flops and come listen to Parrot Beach, a Jimmy Buffet tribute band. Tickets are \$60 and include food, drink and entertainment. The evening will benefit the Rockville Centre Community Fund, which has been helping our neighbors in need for more than 20 years.

For tickets or more information contact Mary Rohrs at (516) 678-9260 or MRohrs@RVCNYUS.

In addition to the Enchanted Winterland, local restaurants will be holding Dine-to-Donate events to raise more money for the Community Fund. MacArthur Park will be holding its event on Jan. 21 from 6 to 8 p.m.,

and CJ's Coffee Shop will be holding an event on Jan. 23 from 8 to 11 a.m., and Nick's Pizza will be holding theirs on Jan. 28 from 6 to 8 p.m. Twenty percent of the proceeds from these events will go to the Community Fund.



Courtesy RVC Community Fund

THE 7TH ANNUAL ENCHANTED WINTERLAND will once again be a tropical paradise as Margaritaville returns to the St. Agnes Parish Center on Jan. 31.



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