

Always tell the tooth; In this case, that's the importance of athletes wearing mouth guards

By Steve Tucker

March 28, 2008

Back in May 2003, Sandburg infielder Jamie Arundel was hit in the mouth with a hard line drive during a softball game at Homewood-Flossmoor. A man came out of the stands and onto the field, identified himself as a dentist and offered to help.

Arundel's mother, Cheri, said at the time, "He did exactly what needed to be done."

"Jamie had a tooth on her hand and others were on the field. She had three on the top and two on the bottom knocked out. He pushed them back in place and told me which teeth by numbers they were for the hospital. The first thing Jamie said was that prom is in two weeks. That's the way 18-year-olds think. I told her that her feet will still move."

But the Arundels didn't know the man's name. After stories in the newspaper, they found their tooth fairy -- Dr. Ken Fried.

It turned out Fried was a dentist attending the game with his then-seventh-grade daughter Melinda. He contacted Cheri Arundel after reading about the Arundels' search for the man who saved Jamie's five teeth.

Melinda Fried now is a senior and honor student at Marian Catholic.

I remembered Arundel this week when I learned that Root Canal Awareness Week is March 30-April 5. The American Association of Endodontists is urging all kids to "watch their mouths" and wear a mouth guard for every sport -- including spring sports such as baseball, lacrosse, softball, track and field and gymnastics.

'Not just for contact sports'

Did you know that soccer players are approximately eight times more likely to suffer dental injuries than football players? Or that nearly 20 percent of baseball players will experience a dental injury? Statistics show that an athlete is 60 times more likely to suffer a dental injury when not wearing a mouth guard and that mouth-guard usage prevents an estimated 200,000 injuries a year.

"Mouth guards are not just for kids that play rough contact sports," said Dr. Shepard S. Goldstein, AAE president and an endodontist from Framingham, Mass. "It is essential that children's teeth be protected from dental injury when they play any physical sport, which is why this year's Root Canal Awareness Week message is so important. The AAE wants athletes, coaches and parents to know that mouth-guard use is imperative for all sports, even those not commonly thought of as being hazardous."

I spoke with Dr. Brad Johnson, the director of post-graduate education in endodontics at UIC.

"In sports like football and hockey, mouth-guard use is mandated in most states," Johnson said. "But there is a growing awareness in the so-called non-contact sports like soccer and baseball.

"It's pretty safe to say that something is better than nothing. You can go from a one-size-fits-all piece that you can buy in a drug store or sports goods store, to a piece that you put in hot water and mold to fit, to a custom-made piece from a dentist. That takes you from the least effective to the most effective and from the least expensive to the most expensive."

Johnson said an endodontist is someone who specializes in root-canal therapy, which would cover traumatic injuries where a root is fractured or a tooth knocked out.

"When you see a dental injury, it can be pretty traumatic," Johnson said. "I would hope that a coach would know what to do.

"The best thing one could do would be to try to replace a tooth if it could be recovered intact. Otherwise, it would be best to place a tooth in a solution -- milk is probably the most available."

Rules are rules

A funny thing about mouth guards is that an incident involving a mouth guard -- or lack of one -- in an Evanston-New Trier East football game 35 years ago led to one of the most talked-about games in the long rivalry.

In 1973, the two were battling in a rainstorm. New Trier East was led by Clay Matthews and Evanston by Mike Kenn, both future NFL first-round draft picks. It was the year before state playoffs began.

New Trier led 3-0 in the fourth quarter when the Wildkits kicked an apparent tying field goal. But a New Trier player told an official the Evanston kicker wasn't wearing a mouth guard. A penalty nullified the kick, and New Trier won 3-0.