

Experts: Wear mouth guards

Report: More kids lose teeth playing sports

By Joseph Hayes

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The pain Port Huron Northern High School junior Max Werner has had to endure in the past year remains fresh in his mind.

Werner still remembers the excitement he felt leading up to his first game last spring with the Nova Youth 17-and-under premiere soccer league. However, he also recalls being injured so severely in the game he would have to undergo two surgeries and be on a liquid-only diet for four months.

"I was running to the ball, and I got caught with an elbow to my face," Werner said. The flailing elbow knocked out Werner's front four teeth and resulted in surgery and brace-like wires being placed in his mouth to keep the structure of his teeth intact.

Dentists and endodontists have issued warnings for years about the dangers of teenagers and children playing sports without mouth guards. Recently, the Michigan Association of Endodontists released a report stating sports-related injuries are the leading cause of children suffering knocked-out teeth.

The report added soccer players are eight times more likely to suffer dental injuries than football players (who wear mouth guards).

It also estimates 20% of baseball players will experience a dental injury during their playing careers.

Still, most student athletes in spring sports, such as baseball and soccer, continue to play without mouth protection.

A long road back

Werner is not alone in encountering a facial injury on the playing field. However, he is one of the few people who have had more than one accident.

After working his way back to the soccer field in time to suit up for the Huskies last fall, Werner suffered another injury related to not wearing a mouth guard.

This time, Werner was on the opposite side of the ball. While going up for a header, an opposing player missed the ball and lodged his teeth into Werner's head.

"My head was split open," Werner said. "He didn't have a mouthpiece on. The doctors told me that if I hadn't worn a mouthpiece I probably would have gotten a concussion."

The Michigan High School Athletic Association has no rules in place requiring a mouth guard for soccer competition, although it does require the use of shin guards and other equipment to protect players' legs.

Capac girls soccer Coach Todd Stank said players are encouraged to wear mouth guards on his field, but it's not a requirement.

"I haven't had any players suffer injuries to their teeth or faces in the 12 years I've been coaching," he said. "We know the teeth are susceptible to injury in any contact sport.

"But it's a choice they make, not a requirement."

Danger looming

Grand Valley State University basketball player Joel Whymer can attest to the dangers of facial injuries.

Whymer, the son of Times Herald Sports Editor Jim Whymer, suffered injuries in middle school, high school and again in college.

The first incident occurred in a backyard basketball game when Whymer chipped his tooth. The second was in high school, when Whymer was a student at Port Huron Northern. There, he chipped his tooth again while playing basketball for the Huskies.

His tooth was knocked out in an incident last year.

Whymer already had one surgery, and another awaits him once the Lakers finish play in the NCAA Division II national tournament.

"Right now, I have a flip tooth that can be removed," Whymer said. "I'm going to have to have another surgery to get a permanent (tooth).

"If I could go back and do it over again, I would definitely wear a mouthpiece. It's been so much of a hassle -- getting it fixed, having to have surgery. It would have been a lot easier if I had always worn a mouthpiece."

Port Huron endodontist Dr. Steven Fegan has known for years about the dangers of sports-related injuries.

"Anyone who is competing in a contact sport should absolutely wear a mouth guard to cushion and protect their teeth from injuries," Fegan said. "People who play contact sports can be bumped or elbowed, which could cause trauma to the teeth."

Fegan said he often has patients come into his office who have had injuries but don't feel the effects for several months.

"Most players and coaches aren't aware of the consequences until after it happens," Fegan said. "Another thing we see is athletes who are playing hockey or basketball in their yards. They don't usually wear the same protection they would if it were an actual game.

"Every time they step out there they should protect themselves from injury."

WHAT TO DO IN CASE OF AN ACCIDENT

- Pick up the tooth by the crown (the chewing surface), not the root. Handle the tooth carefully by the crown, avoiding the tooth opening, to help minimize injury to the root.
- If the tooth is dirty, gently rinse it with a spray of water, while taking care not to handle the root surface. Do not use soap or chemicals and do not scrub or dry the tooth or wrap it in tissue or cloth.
- Reposition the tooth in the socket immediately, if possible. The sooner the tooth is replaced the greater chance for survival. To reinsert, carefully push the tooth into the socket and close the mouth slowly. Hold in place with fingers or by gently biting down.
- Keep the tooth moist at all times. If the tooth cannot be replaced, put it in a glass of milk or in the mouth next to the cheek. If none of these are practical, use water with a pinch of salt.
- If possible, see an endodontist within 30 minutes. A tooth sometimes can be saved even if it's outside the mouth for more than an hour, but getting professional help within 30 minutes improves the odds of successful reimplantation.