Sports injuries - a rite of passage for young athletes, and parents

BY TRAVIS BAKER KICKING THE PUCK BLOG

Ten years of being a boy. All those falls learning to walk and ride a bike. All those tumbles off playground equipment and that time he flew off the ski trail. Six years of hockey, baseball, lacrosse, soccer, track, yoga, basketball and dodgeball. Lightsaber battles in the back yard and bigfoot hunting expeditions in the woods. Paddleboarding, mountain climbing, snorkeling, zip-lining, wrestling, dog walking, lego making, watersliding and no major injuries.

Two weeks of football and we're headed to the ER.

It's a common enough injury: trying to make a catch and the ball jammed Zane's left index finger. Happened to me a few times. Happened to pretty much anyone who's ever tossed the old pigskin around. While not particularly serious and certainly not life-threatening, we felt it was worth getting checked out just in case. As the injury occurred at night,

our options were limited as to where to go. We headed to St. Joseph's ER where they have the x-ray facilities to diagnose the damage and a pediatrics' ward if need be.

This was not Zane's first trip to an ER. We'd rushed him to EMMC the day after his second birthday when he got stung by bees or wasps and had a pretty severe reaction. He recovered with some Benedryl and mama love. He'd also been to the St. Joe's ER not long ago when his dad fell through a trap door and broke three ribs and punctured a lung.

So we dropped his little brother back home with mom, grabbed a book and headed to Bangor. We should have grabbed two books, and the iPad and snacks because the vending machines eat up your stray quarters pretty quick, and there's not much else to do in a waiting room except wait.

After checking in, I quickly noted that Zane was not the only young athlete present. There was a girl in a youth soccer uniform sitting in a wheelchair with what appeared to be a sprained ankle. Another girl would be helped in by her family after having suffered a concussion playing field hockey. Later a boy would arrive with another soccer related ankle injury.

Each child was checked in, evaluated and, eventually, shown to a room for treatment. In between we waited just like everyone else.

The best was the jovial, older gentleman with the large float lure hooked into the palm of his hand. Zane thought that was the coolest part of the night and the fisherman obliged his curiosity by showing him the embedded hook. I got to say a patented dad thing like, "And that's why we're always very careful with our lures, Zane."

What do you say about

catching a football? DAD: You need to be very careful as to how your reach out to pluck the football out of the air, son. You could lose a finger if you do it the wrong way. Your Uncle Pete once lost his whole arm trying to make a catch in the State Title game. SON: How'd he do that?

DAD: They were playing the Tigers. Real tigers. Tiger ripped his arm right off.

Sports are great. Youth sports are even better. They help keep our kids active, healthy, and happy. They teach them about hard work, perseverance, dealing with adversity, teamwork, pride, humility and so on. And yet, by allowing them to participate, we are also subjecting them to the very real possibility of injury. Sometimes catastrophic injury.

Recent Boston Universitv studies show that 87 out of 91 NFL football players were diagnosed with CTE (chronic traumatic encephalopathy) to the brain as a result of playing the sport.

Camden Hills just announced they are suspending their football program due to injuries including concussions and joint sprains making them unable to field a competitive team. There is always the rare threat of paralysis from a tackle gone wrong.

Soccer players suffer torn ligaments, concussions. sprained ankles and shin splints. A broken nose can happen in softball or baseball and basketball takes aim at ankles, knees, and feet.

Cheerleaders crash onto hardwood floors, gymnasts smack into vaults, hockey players crunch into boards.

There are hunting accidents in the woods, shark attacks in the water and sometimes boys go fishing and never come back.

But what can we do? Encase our kids in bubble-wrap and sit them on the couch? They'll sprain their thumbs playing XBox and get diabetes from not moving.

We hope our kids don't get hurt, and we hope our kids' friends don't get hurt and we hope the kids on the other teams don't get hurt and they get to enjoy the games they play.

And we can be thankful. Thankful that there are nurses and doctors not very far away to tape up fingers and reset bones and we have insurance We can be thankful our kids are getting hurt playing games and not having to run for their lives from a war. Thankful they're swimming for a medal and not for the shore. Thankful some nut case isn't shooting up their school.

Next week, Zane puts his football away. Hockey season is starting up and that left hand will be inserted into a heavily padded goalie glove. We'll lace him up and strap him in, and we'll send him out on the ice to have buckets of 6-ounce vulcanized rubber pucks shot at him. His first game of the year takes place in Yarmouth at the Travis Roy Arena, named after the young man who broke his spine 11 seconds into his first shift with BU in 1995 and has since become an advocate for safer play.

We'll hope Zane stays healthy. We'll be thankful every time he comes off the ice with a smile on his face. And we'll keep a few extra books and some spare change in the car just in case.

Travis Baker is an Orono resident, playwright, teacher and father. He writes the BDN blog Kicking the Puck.



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