



## The changing view of concussions in football

By [MATTHEW PETERS, STAFF WRITER](#)

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Dr. Thomas Liu can talk at length, and passionately so, about high school athletics.

The orthopedic surgeon runs the Southern California Bone and Joint Clinic and specializes in sports medicine and concussion care. He can often be seen Friday nights patrolling the sideline as the team physician for one of several local high school football teams.

That passion is no less evident — even as his tone changes dramatically — when asked what he thinks about the old-school approach of labeling a potentially concussion-causing hit as simply “getting your bell rung.”

“It really pisses me off, to be honest,” Liu said. “It shows that they are really disrespecting the injury and they really don’t understand how serious it is. It upsets me.”

When that happens, Liu tries to educate. His interest in concussions started when he studied under Dr. Michael Collins and Dr. Mark Lovell at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. Collins and Lovell are leading concussion researchers who developed the ImpACT baseline concussion test and helped write the NFL’s concussion guidelines. When Liu opened his Hesperia clinic in 2010 he began reaching out to local teams to offer the ImpACT, short for Immediate Post-Concussion Assessment and Cognitive Testing, baseline exam.

When someone uses a term that is quickly becoming a relic of a foregone time and still doesn’t listen, Liu just lets it be.

“I’m not trying to pick a fight,” Liu said. “All I can do is try to educate them. It’s just like any other piece of medical advice. They can choose to take it or leave it. I know the data is on my side clearly.”

The data only keeps flowing. Concussions have become a hot topic in sports, particularly football where former collegiate and professional players are banding together through the legal system.

More than 4,500 former NFL players have filed suit against the league in more than 200 lawsuits. Meanwhile, USA Today reported the NCAA was considering a settlement in a lawsuit filed by former Eastern Illinois football player Adrian Arrington for damages from lasting effects of concussions. The plaintiffs filed a motion seeking class-action certification on July 19.

There are an estimated 300,000 sports-related concussions in the United States each year, according to a 2012 American Journal of Sports Medicine paper. In the study, which ran from 2008 to 2010, 1,936 concussions were reported in high school sports. Football accounted for the most concussions (47.1 percent) out of the 20 high school sports monitored and had the highest rate of concussions.

Local high school coaches freely acknowledge that the culture has changed drastically from their playing days and has continued to evolve greatly in recent years. The High Desert’s two longest tenured coaches are evidence of that.

“As far as the culture, everything’s changed,” Serrano head coach Ray Maholchic said. “I don’t want to say

we baby the kids, but we actually look out for the kids a little more, which is a good thing. It's really more safety oriented."

Apple Valley head coach Frank Pulice said his opinion changed dramatically when he attended a concussion seminar in 2011 in Riverside along with representatives from many other High Desert schools. Pulice said he was particularly moved by videos of former players who weren't the same anymore due to concussions.

"We all played and concussions were different in the '70s and '80s," Pulice said. "There's such a focus on memory loss and problems later with your head. There's too much education and knowledge now to ignore it."

Coaches have changed not just their attitude about concussions, but their approach to the game. Several coaches spoke of re-emphasizing tackling techniques and teaching players to not to lead with their helmet.

"We teach form tackling way back in spring," Hesperia head coach Jeremy Topete said. "Eyes to the sky, wrap in and seeing what you hit. We do that all spring and all summer. So when we put the gear on, at that point it's just re-emphasizing."

Maholchic and Oak Hills head coach Robert Kistner said they limit full-speed contact plays in practice.

Today MLB, MLS, the NBA, the NFL, and the NHL all have concussion policies, but in each case those policies were only enacted within the last four years.

An internal NCAA survey from 2010 that was recently revealed due to court proceedings showed that 50 percent of responding schools didn't require players with concussions to see a physician, according to AL.com. Half reported allowing players to return to the game after suffering a concussion.

In California, that cannot legally happen for any athlete in any school-sponsored sport from kindergarten through 12th grade. The state passed Assembly Bill 25 in 2011, requiring any player suspected of having a concussion to be pulled from the game and not allowed to return to competition until cleared by a licensed health care provider. As part of the law, parents and players are required to sign a head injury information sheet prior to the season.

The state went a step further in 2012 when it passed a bill requiring all high school coaches to receive training for concussions.

On the field, the parts of the rulebook covering helmet hits have been emphasized to referees. Both offensive and defensive players can be charged with a 15-yard penalty for leading with the head or ejected if the hit is deemed malicious.

A sampling of local players showed various opinions. Some have had concussions, some worried about getting one and others didn't.

"I've feared that I've gotten one before, but eventually it wears off through a game," Serrano senior lineman Brendyn Lolmaugh said. "It really does scare me, but you just have to keep playing. It's always in the back of your head, but you just can't let it control you, you know?"

Sultana senior running back Sal Garcia suffered a concussion at the end of his sophomore year after a head-to-head hit.

"He was to the point he was calling the ref 'coach' and he was looking around," lineman Kyle Alberts said. "I and a couple other players told the referee, 'Hey, he's not doing so good.' "

With one game remaining in the season, Garcia wanted to play but wasn't cleared.

"I took it kind of hard because I love being on the field and I almost took someone's pads to be on the

field, but the coach just didn't let me."

Garcia experienced post-concussion symptoms for about a month after the collision and missed a significant chunk of school. Today, he acknowledges sitting out was the right move. "It is a hard choice," Garcia said. "You've got to go with what's right."

Part of the problem is that there is still so much unknown about concussions and how to treat them. Studies are ongoing. Once it's determined that a player has a concussion, the only treatment is rest. Players who return too quickly are at a heightened risk of doing more brain damage or in rare cases dying from what's known as second-impact syndrome. Liu said there are drugs and other treatments in the experimental stage, but none close enough to mention as a standard of care.

"A concussion is so complex," Liu said. "Even the definition is still ever changing. It's definitely a work in progress. Even as much progress as we think we've made, it's definitely still changing."

We've reached the point where most people don't trivialize head injuries, Liu said. Which puts football in place to tackle a problem it once almost ignored.

"Sports by nature, it's risky," Liu said. "But again, if played safely we can try to make the sport as safe as possible. But the thing is, if we don't make football as safe as possible, unfortunately it may go down toward the path of boxing and that would be horrible. How many boxing matches do you see on TV anymore? Not much. Obviously the cat is out of the bag on that one."

*Matthew Peters can be reached at [mpeters@vvdailypress.com](mailto:mpeters@vvdailypress.com) or at 760-955-5365.*

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