

**Concussion tests proposed for football, other sports
Supporters say tests would keep UIL athletes safe.**

By Danny Yadron

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Leander High School athletic trainer Wayne Lauritzen said he never thought a single concussion was life threatening. He still doesn't.

But there's enough danger in suffering a second trauma before the brain heals that Lauritzen spearheaded a concussion testing program for all his school's contact sports in 2003, one year after an Austin quarterback died from what doctors determined was a series of collisions.

"It's the nature of the sport," Lauritzen said. "Kids who play football are always taught to be tough. They come to the coach with a mild headache and some nausea. They tend to brush that off."

At Leander, trainers test students' cognitive abilities and balance before the season begins. If a concussion occurs during the season — and five to 15 usually do — the student would take the same set of tests after the injury. Players need to achieve their preseason score and go a week without symptoms before retaking the field.

The system seems to be working, said Steve Gideon, the school's head football coach, and it's one that might expand with a new proposal in the state House.

Under House Bill 4627, sponsored by Rep. Eddie Lucio III, D-San Benito, preseason cognitive tests would be required — much like a high school physical — of all University Interscholastic League athletes who play contact sports. The results would be used as a baseline to gauge a student's neurological health after a concussion.

New Jersey and Pennsylvania are considering similar measures, according to the Texas Speech-Language-Hearing Association. "Our goal is not to keep athletes out of the game," said Bess Sirmon Fjordbak, vice president for social and governmental policy at the association, which is lobbying for the measure. "We all love sports. Our goal is to keep them safe."

Concussions, a disruption in brain function, occur after a blow or severe shaking of the head and can range from mild to grave. Symptoms usually include amnesia, nausea, headaches and fatigue. About 10 percent of the state's 165,000 football players will suffer a concussion at some point, said Sirmon Fjordbak, a pathologist at the University of Texas at El Paso who is studying concussions' effects on the brain.

"Historically, the word has always gone 'Oh yeah, his bell rung,' or 'He saw stars,'" she said. "That's really not safe. You do not know how much damage has happened."

The proposed computer-based test, performed by a doctor, would measure students' reaction time to various questions at the beginning of the season. If a head injury occurs during play, the student could retake the same test to compare scores. Supporters hope that, like at Leander, athletes would be sidelined until they return to preseason form, even if that means sitting out for a time.

Post-collision tests would not be mandatory under the proposal, and coaches, not doctors, would decide when a player resumes play, Sirmon Fjordbak said.

"I like it," Gideon said of his own school's system. "At first I thought we had to make time for it; it was one of those things. Well, it's just part of the routine now."

But the electronic tests proposed by the bill require a second trip to the doctor after what is often a mild knock to the head, Lauritzen said, and persuading a player to do this is not always an easy task. The electronic tests also tend to cost more than the manual tests used at Leander, he said.

The first test called for in the bill would cost \$2 to \$3, and the post-collision test would cost about \$10, said Larry Higdon, director of legislation for the Texas Speech-Language-Hearing Association. The fees would either be paid by parents or schools, Higdon said.

"I can't imagine why anyone would want to oppose something that's going to help make better decisions for a young person's future," he said. "But you never know ... football is religion in Texas."

UIL does not take positions on pending legislation, said Mark Cousins, director of communications.

The Legislature passed a bill in 2007 that requires athletic personnel at Texas high schools to be trained to recognize signs of sports injuries, including concussions.

The legislation is known as "Will's Bill" for Will Benson, a St. Stephen's Episcopal School quarterback who died in September 2002 after suffering a cerebral hemorrhage during a game.

House Bill 4627 now sits in the Higher Education Committee. No public hearing has been scheduled.

<http://www.statesman.com/search/content/region/legislature/stories/04/06/0406concussion.html>