

**CCMH works with local school on
ImPACT Program**

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ATLANTIC – For many people, football is a fall ritual – they look forward to attending and watching games with their friends, friendly arguments over plays and calls, watching their children and others compete for the local team. Unfortunately, the football tradition is accompanied by a tradition of brain injuries. According to the Centers for Disease Control, there are an estimated 300,000 sports-related concussions every year in the United States. The likelihood of an athlete in a contact sport experiencing a concussion is estimated to be as high as 1 out of 5. In the past, the decision to return to action was somewhat subjective. The ImPACT (Immediate Post-Concussion Assessment and Cognitive Testing) assessment, now being used at Atlantic High School (AHS), provides measurable data to help determine when it is safe for a player to return to action following a brain injury.

Mike Rohde, Cass County Memorial Hospital Director of Rehab Services, saw a television feature on the ImPACT Assessment last year. He was so impressed he followed up with the athletic trainer interviewed in the piece, did some more research and then approached Josh Rasmussen, AHS Athletic Director, about bringing the test to AHS. Mike stressed the importance of objective measurement in assessing brain injuries. “An athlete can look and act almost normal, but the brain could be bruised and not working correctly,” he explained. “Returning to play too soon can cause lifelong damage.”

ImPACT is the most widely used computer-based testing program in the world and is implemented effectively across high school, collegiate, and professional levels of sport participation. The test measures a player’s symptoms, verbal and visual memory, processing speed, and their reaction time to 1/100th of a second. Athletes complete a 20 minute pre-season screening to obtain a baseline measure; in Atlantic that testing is done by Kristi Simpson, AHS nurse. The test will be used for football, basketball,

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wrestling, soccer, baseball and softball. If an athlete does incur a head injury, they are re-evaluated, and baseline scores are compared to post-injury scores to diagnosis the extent of brain injury. Players are tested throughout rehab and treatment to determine their readiness to return to exertion, academics and sports. All of the testing and evaluation is done in consultation with a medical provider. The ImPACT program software costs about \$500 per year; a private donor purchased the program for AHS this year.

Austin Conrad was among the first group of AHS athletes to be screened with ImPACT this fall. A senior football player, Austin took a hard hit during the game in Glenwood. Unable to stand, the referee immediately removed him from the game. Although he had improved somewhat Austin's mother, Lynda, called the Cass County Memorial Hospital Emergency Department that Friday evening, and took him to see Dr. Angela Wepler at the Atlantic Medical Center Saturday morning. Dr. Wepler explained the process to the Conrads and worked with Mike to re-test Austin, a test his mother reports he "failed miserably." By Sunday Austin was acting and feeling normal, other than a headache. "I'm sure he would have been back to practice Monday if we didn't have the ImPACT test," Lynda said. "It was hard for him to miss the Homecoming game that Friday, but a brain is just too important to take a chance with."

ImPACT has five phases:

- Pre-season baseline testing and education
- Injury results with diagnosis of concussion
- Post-injury ImPACT test given; if scores are not in normal range the athlete continues to rest the brain. Re-test in 5 – 7 days.
- If scores are within normal ranges and athlete does not have symptoms, a progressive physical exertion testing is performed over 3 – 4 days.
- If no symptoms reoccur during the physical exertion program, the athlete is cleared to return to play.

"Austin's case is a perfect example of how ImPACT makes a difference," Mike noted. Austin's scores three days after the concussion showed a 47% decrease in verbal memory, 64% decrease in visual memory and 24% increase (slower) in reaction time, with a symptom score of 15. "It was pretty obvious by the scores his brain was not functioning well, but to look at him he looked and acted fine," Mike said. "In the past

he would have been cleared to play.” By resting his brain for just one week, Austin’s test scores returned to his baseline testing or better, and his symptom score returned to 0. He was cleared to begin working on the progressive physical exertion program, and then was able to return to play.

The ImPACT program is a joint effort between coaches, officials, athletes, parents and medical professionals. “It takes everyone working together in the best interest of the athletes,” Mike noted. “It’s easy for kids to get caught up in the competition and want to get back to playing as soon as possible, but we have to be sure their health is protected first.” Mike emphasized the importance of parents watching and listening for things that just aren’t “quite right” after a head injury. Often during and after an injury symptoms are brushed off as not serious enough to cause concern. The ImPACT program takes the guess work out of it, reducing the chance of a serious follow-up injury.

The Conrad family agrees. “We are so glad the ImPACT test was available,” Lynda said. “And we are so thankful to have Mike – he helped Austin get back to football quickly, but more importantly safely.”

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