



BY CHARLES J. GATT, JR., MD

Friday Night Lights

25 years of covering high school football

I have always been a big fan of football. As a lifelong, diehard New York Giant fan, my fall Sundays have usually revolved around what time the Giants game was on. That certainly has been a journey of ups and downs. In 1995, I began my practice in orthopaedic sports medicine in Glendale, CA. Since I had completed a fellowship in sports medicine at The Cleveland Clinic Foundation, I was anxious to put my training to good use. After a few introductions, I was asked to provide coverage for the Crescenta Valley High School football games. So began my journey of Friday night football. Due to budget limitations, many schools in California did not have an athletic trainer. One of the coaches had some tape and ace wraps in a tool box. When players were injured, rather than a distracted coach treating them, I was able to do a sideline evaluation and determine if

they were able to safely return to the game. I packed a bag of supplies from my office such as knee braces, ankle braces and slings so I would be better equipped to help out the players. The coaches and parents were certainly appreciative. And, I must say, standing outside on a clear Friday night in southern California, enjoying football was rather pleasant.

After two years, my family moved back to New Jersey and I joined University Orthopaedic Associates. I was offered and accepted the opportunity to provide coverage for Hillsborough High School. This was an exciting time to be around Hillsborough football. For the next several years, Hillsborough was always in the running for the Group IV state championship. In comparison to California, New Jersey high schools all had at least one athletic trainer. So, I entered into an environment



where the athletic trainer was always looking out for the well being of the student athletes and I had someone to work with. There was another big difference. Unlike California, Friday night weather was not guaranteed to be clear and pleasant. From September to late November, nights ranged from beautifully, to hot and humid, to cold and rainy or snowy and could be downright nasty. However, one thing didn't change – the enthusiasm of the players, coaches, parents and community. Since Hillsborough was a perennial powerhouse, the stands were completely full for every game and the fans were lined up three deep around the track.

As the physician on the sidelines, I certainly enjoyed the excitement of the game. However, I was there to care for the athletes and I took that responsibility very seriously. I watched play closely for any signs that someone had been injured. Players would run off the field with injuries and I was able to examine them on the sidelines and determine if it was safe for them to return to play. This included all kinds of bumps and bruises, cuts, sprains, and strains. It also included concussion evaluations. I remember thinking, "If this was my son, would I let him back in the game?" And, to that end, in a minute or two, a worried parent would be at the fence asking if their son was OK.

In one of the most exciting games I ever watched, Hillsborough won on the last play, the crowd erupted in joy and people were running all over the field. I scanned the field and saw one of the players bent over at the 40 yard line and he wasn't celebrating. I ran over to check him and he was in significant discomfort. I was concerned he had sustained a serious abdominal injury. The athletic trainer found his parents and I told them they should take him to the emergency room right away. It turns out he had a "fractured kidney" and lost a lot of blood. Fortunately, his kidney did not have to be removed and he made a full recovery.

From an orthopaedic standpoint, I have managed many musculoskeletal injuries on the field and on the sidelines. I have put dislocated shoulders, elbows, ankles and even a hip back into place. I put an opposing player's finger back into place and he returned to the game and ended up being a key player for the team that won that night.

In 2008, my oldest son joined the Montgomery High School football team. Fortunately, that same year, Montgomery needed a physician to cover their games. Interestingly, Montgomery and Hillsborough are neighboring towns and sports rivals. It was difficult to end my relationship with Hillsborough but I knew my place was in Montgomery. For the next four years, I was on

the sidelines for every Montgomery football game - home and away. Montgomery was a relatively new football program and did not have the storied success of Hillsborough. However, the enthusiasm of the community was tremendous. As much as I enjoyed the excitement of the games, I knew I was there to take care of players. This time, the players were the friends of my son and the players parents were my friends. For me, that added a bit of pressure to the situation. However, I was reassured one time when a parent told me how glad they were that I was on the sideline while their son was playing football.



My son has since graduated and I continue to cover Montgomery high school games. As a sports medicine fellow, I was on the sidelines for Cleveland Browns football games. Now, on Saturdays, I am on the sidelines of Rutgers football games. Both the professional and collegiate level coverage have their own experiences. However, there will always be a special place in my heart for high school football. I have worked with and learned from some outstanding athletic trainers. Their dedication and commitment to the players and the community often goes unrecognized but is truly admirable. I have seen the positive impact good coaches can have on the lives of young boys transitioning into men. I have witnessed the sense of hard work, camaraderie and teamwork football instills in these young athletes. I am grateful the schools, coaches, parents, and players trust me to care for their teams. I will always try to give back with a watchful eye on the sidelines on fall Friday nights.



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