

Testimony of Ian Heaton

Student Ambassador for the National Council on Youth Sports Safety

Subcommittee on Commerce, Manufacturing, and Trade

“Improving Sports Safety: A Multi-faceted Approach”

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Chairman Terry, Ranking Member Schakowsky, and Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for the opportunity to share my story today. My name is Ian Heaton, and I am here as a Student Ambassador for the National Council on Youth Sports Safety. I am also a senior at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School in Bethesda, Maryland. I was a sophomore playing in a high school off-season lacrosse game when I sustained a serious head injury that we later discovered was my third concussion. Until then, I did not appreciate what a great life I was living. I got good grades in challenging classes; played high school lacrosse; was working on my 2nd degree black belt in martial arts; had a job I loved teaching Tae Kwan Do; performed with my school’s jazz ensemble and combo; and had an active social life. It was over in a split second. The concussion left me with only 5% of normal cognitive activity and I was almost immobilized. I have spent two-and-a-half- years recovering and at times, have wondered if I would ever get that life back. It has been a long, slow process.

At first, all I wanted to do was sleep. Noise, light, and even moving my eyes caused headaches and nausea. I was enrolled in the Children’s Hospital Safe Concussion Outcome Recovery & Education program (SCORE), where I received ongoing cognitive evaluation and treatment for symptoms. After missing school for two weeks I tried to go back, but was unable to function. The frustration of trying to focus on lectures, moving through the pandemonium of the halls and the constant sensory bombardment made a normal school day impossible. However, through my school, I eventually enrolled in a home teaching program, and with the help of tutors and family was able to complete my

semester coursework at my own pace. I finally returned to school in December, but was still far from recovered.

I have spent the two-and-a-half-years since my concussion slowly regaining organizational skills, the ability to learn and retain information, and most important, my personality. During this time, my friends and family learned to recognize the signs that meant I needed to “shut down” from any kind of mental or physical activity for a day or two. These relapses were particularly tough and discouraging and meant that I had to drop a class and miss a band trip to Chicago, among other things. The worst was when I had a “crash” and could not go to my first concert, the “Red Hot Chili Peppers”. The friend I gave my ticket to really owes me.

The spring after my injury, I was medically cleared to return to sports but made the hard decision that I would not play lacrosse, or other intensive sports, again. I know that a lot of people recover and return to play, but the possibility of another concussion means I could lose everything again, just like that, and might not come back the next time.

I now look at my recovery as something that has made me stronger, but I know that I am one of the very lucky ones who had the resources and medical attention I needed, and a school system that is aware of concussion issues and provided an unusually high level of support. It’s not over yet—my recovery continues. But, my outlook is positive and I am excited about the future as I prepare for college; I am thinking about becoming a high school math or science teacher.

I now have a hard question: what can be done to create a safer sports environment and to ensure that when injuries do occur, the support for full recovery is available? We can’t just do away with youth sports. I have played baseball, travel soccer, and league and high school lacrosse, and being on those teams not only gave me a healthy outlet, it taught me important lessons. Sports are one of the best

parts of growing up and becoming a strong adult. They teach us that if we work hard, we will become skilled and proud of our accomplishments. They teach us how to be part of a team, to have pride in success and learn the lessons of defeat. They teach us that we sometimes have to quit thinking of ourselves and think of the good of the team. For these and many other reasons, I hope that steps can be taken so that future young athletes have these opportunities.

There are two important things I think would make a big difference. The first is to change the cultures of hitting hard to take out a good opponent rather than playing to win through skill; and of brushing off injuries to get back into the game. While better equipment may decrease injuries, it is coaches, parents and players who have to back away from the need to win at all cost, or the fear of losing status on the team when out for an injury, and to be willing to recover fully before returning to play. It will take a while, but if youth AND professional sports are to survive, these attitudes must be embraced. Second, when injuries do occur, we must have a way for qualified personnel to quickly assess injuries on the field, have players get immediate attention, and then support recovery through our schools and medical institutions. These are the things that were done for me, and are the reason I have been able to return to normal.

As a Student Ambassador for the NCYSS, the message I hope to give young athletes is this: you think you are invulnerable. You take risks and brush off injuries because you think you will recover quickly from anything that happens. You won't. Don't be a hero, especially when it comes to your head. It's the only brain you'll have and your personality is who you are. It's not worth a couple of seasons of glory to lose the opportunity of your whole life.

Thank you for listening.

Attached supplemental material:

-Description of the Montgomery County Public Schools Home and Hospital Teaching program

-Information on the Children's Hospital Safe Concussion Outcome Recovery and Education (SCORE) program