High School Notebook: Heady matter for soccer players

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For those who’ve been watching high school girls soccer the last couple years, those new headbands you’ve been seeing are not the latest fashion statement.

The headbands are actually headguards designed to protect against concussions, and are mostly worn by players who have already suffered from the brain injury that’s risen in notoriety over the last few years.

Although in terms of actual concussion prevention, the headbands may be no more effective than a new set of earrings.

"It absolutely does not protect against concussions," said Ashland’s Ilyza Holman, who’s been wearing one since last season.

Holliston’s Jordan Bynoe donned the headgear at the behest of her parents when she got her first concussion as an eighth-grader. That was three years and four concussions ago, the most recent coming in September, all suffered while wearing her F90 Premier Headguard. Another concussion could mean the end of her playing career.

"It’s definitely helped in lessening the severity of the concussions because they’ve only been mild," Bynoe said. "But sometimes I haven’t even gotten hit in that part of the head (that’s protected). It’s more the forehead and sides of the head (that are protected). And somewhat the back, but not the top, or even one of my concussions I got elbowed in the nose. There’s nothing you can do about that."

Most players who use the guards — almost all girls — are wearing the F90 gear, which is made by Full 90 Sports. The headguard covers a two-inch area, uses foam to cover the player’s forehead and temples, and costs $45.

On the Full 90 Sports website, the F90 Premier Headguard is billed as "built to defend against hard surface impacts, and has been proven to reduce the probability of a concussion." The company cites a study that college players not using the gear were 2.65 times more likely to get a concussion than those with it.

It’s a claim that has gotten much dispute.

"I don’t think they’re developed to the point where they’re very effective," Ashland girls soccer coach Bob Muscaro said. "They protect against impact injuries. Concussions are when the brain impacts the skull, and I don’t know how one of these helps that."

"My problem with the headbands is that they’re primarily marketed as a concussion-reduction device. That is something that there is no proof that they are," Dr. Robert Cantu, the Concord-based neurosurgeon and one of the leading concussion experts in the country, told NBC News over the summer.
Full 90 Sports did not respond to an interview request.

Holman starting wearing the headguard after getting concussed early last season. She missed about a month, returned with the protection, but was headbutted in her second game back. The second concussion kept her out the rest of the season.

This season, Holman has worn the guard every game and hasn’t had another concussion. The feeling of the concussions has never truly left the senior midfielder, though. The headaches eventually dissipated, but the memories of the pain, and sometimes even the pain itself, return on every header. Holman said the headguard helps with that.

"It’s not so much of less chance of an injury — it’s just more of a mindset that I have something protecting my head," she said. "It does give me more comfort when I head the ball. (There’s) not the sting, it just doesn’t hurt as much when I head the ball."

The surge in concussion awareness and the potential effects of brain injuries on younger people have manifested itself in the State House, where a bill that would explicitly allow protective headgear currently resides. The bill, filed by Rep. Chris Walsh, D-Framingham, in February, is going through the bureaucratic stages and seems far from a potential vote.

"It allows for protective headgear — does NOT mandate it — so that a player who wishes to use it cannot be sidelined for it," Walsh wrote in an e-mail. "The issue of concussions is starting to gain traction, particularly in younger players whose brains are much more vulnerable to long-term damage ... and for whatever reason young girls seem to have the highest incidence of concussions in any of the subgroups so it stands to reason that they — or their parents — might be more inclined to use this gear."

The Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts, based in Westborough, is skeptical of the headguards and has declined to endorse the bill.

"We have no proof that the headband advertised is as effective as the company claims," BIA-MA spokeswoman Emmy Llewellyn wrote in an e-mail. "Therefore, we make no endorsement."

At most, one or two players per team wear the headguard now, numbers that could multiply in the next few years. What once looked like a bizarre headband is on its way to becoming accepted soccer gear.

As Holman puts it, "It’s like wearing shin guards now."