Two Ex-Athletes Tell How Seriously They Were Injured

Students at Bellingham High not only heard the sobering statistics about traumatic brain injuries, but they also got an up-close and personal look at two young men whose lives were changed dramatically by head injuries.

Kevin Lechak, a 26-year-old graduate of King Phillips Regional who was a high jumper in track, was injured during his senior year of high school, attempting to catch a football while on a roof. The other speaker, 21-year-old Michael Gray, played football at South Kingstown High in southern Rhode Island. He suffered a concussion during practice, but continued to play.

Lechak and Gray addressed students on Oct. 29 in an afternoon session in the high school auditorium and later spoke to parents in an evening presentation.

Before Lechak and Gray revealed their personal history of dealing with TBI (traumatic brain injury), Steve Butera, a volunteer for the Massachusetts Brain Injury Association, presented both audiences with some eye-opening statistics about the condition.

"Someone suffers a traumatic brain injury every 14.5 seconds, and the incidence is eight times higher than those with breast cancer and 34 times higher than those with HIV," said Butera, who labeled himself as an ambassador for the association. "I'm retired, but I volunteer for whatever the association needs. I lost my wife, Andrea, at the age of 54 this year because of a traumatic brain injury."

Butera, who lives in Franklin, said that 1.7 million individuals suffer a traumatic brain injury each year and that 170,000 people are treated for sports and recreation-related TBIs annually. He emphasized that, according to the World Health Organization, the condition will surpass many diseases as a cause of death and disability by 2020.

"It's a silent epidemic, and most of the 170,000 injuries stem from bicycling, football, soccer and basketball," he said. "Lately, there's been an increase caused by domestic violence, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and servicemen and women hurt by IEDs (Improved Explosive Devices)."

Lechak's brain injury occurred during track practice when he was working out with a teammate. He was attempting to catch a football and landed on a mat.

"I caught the ball, but my heels landed on the edge of the mat and my head hit the floor, which was a combination of rubber and cement," Lechak said. "I went to Hasbro Children's Hospital in Rhode Island for 1-1/2 months and was in a coma for 5 weeks and 5 days."

Transferred later to Boston for therapy for another 1-1/2 months, Lechak strived to get well but "was slowed down." He still learning to be myself," Lechak said. "The injury caused me to be deaf in my right ear, and I have no sense of smell. My new purpose is to keep speaking and volunteering for the Massachusetts Brain Injury Association. I'm glad I can make you aware of these things. Remember that everything can change for you at the snap of a finger."

Lechak is now working in Lexington at the Douglass House, a home for survivors of TBI. He assists with physical therapy and maintenance.

Ed Lechak, Kevin's father, spoke at the night session, focusing on how his son's injury affected the entire family. "To see Kevin hooked up to wires and knowing doctors had to drill through his skull to insert a monitor was difficult," he said. "My wife and I were at the hospital every day, and Kevin's injury definitely affected our other children. I'm proud of what Kevin has done and what he's overcome, but it was difficult for all members of the family."

Michael Gray's injury, which occurred on Aug. 25, 2010, was diagnosed as a subdural hematoma, or bleeding on the brain. Playing safety, he

BRAIN INJURY - cont. on next pg.
Valley Tech Students Celebrate Mole Day

Blackstone Valley Tech honors chemistry students had a lot of fun while learning a valuable equation on National Mole Day, which is celebrated each year on October 25 from 6:02 a.m. to 6:02 p.m. in honor of Avogadro’s Number (6.02 x 10^23). Named for its creator, Amadeo Avogadro, the equation uses the basic measuring unit known as a mole to determine the number of molecules or atoms in a given substance. BVT honors chemistry students made a fabric-mole tribute to Avogadro’s Number and used the equation to determine the number of molecules within given pieces of Mole Day chocolate treats.

Blackstone Valley Regional Vocational Technical High School (www.valleytech.k12.ma.us) serves the towns of Bellingham, Blackstone, Douglas, Grafton, Hopkinton, Mendon, Milford, Millbury, Millville, Northbridge, Sutton, Upton and Uxbridge. Located in the heart of the Blackstone Valley, Blackstone Valley Tech creates a positive learning community that prepares students for personal and professional success in an internationally competitive society through a fusion of vigorous vocational, technical, and academic skills.

BRAIN INJURY — continued from previous page

In his head. He continued for one more play, but a seizure, vomiting and blackouts followed, forcing Gray to Rhode Island Hospital for two weeks before being assigned to Vanderbuilt Rehab Center in New York, where he got help with speech and physical and occupational therapy.

“I missed the first quarter of my senior year,” he said. “I had to learn how to walk and talk again, but I’ve been blessed because I’ve had no repercussions since. Currently, I’m a student at Dean College and I serve as a manager in football, helping with filming.”

Gray told his audiences that his helmet fit tightly and “may have increased [his] chance for injury.”

“My coach saved my life,” Gray emphasized. “He acted quickly getting me help. I knew my situation went from routine to life threatening because my head felt like it was going to explode. When I was hospitalized, part of my skull was removed to relieve the bleeding on the brain. I had a slur when I spoke, but therapists worked with me. Some social settings are difficult, but my goal is to graduate from Dean with a degree in sports management. I’ve been on the Dean’s List for two years, and I want to get a master’s degree and be a graduate assistant for a college football team.”

Gray admonished his audience, saying “Be aware of sustaining a traumatic brain injury because it can happen at any time and can become dangerous if appropriate action isn’t taken.”

“I’m motivated to never giving up on myself,” Gray concluded.

The dual program was sponsored by the Bellingham High athletic department, the administration, the guidance department, and the Bellingham Lions Club. The presentation was organized by Elena Rosemeyer, president of the Lions Club.

written by KEN HAMWAY, Bulletin Sports Editor

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DECEMBER 2013

Raise Some Dough for Food Pantry

All are invited to UNO Chicago Grill in Bellingham on Tuesday, Dec. 10, to eat, drink and raise some money for the Loaves and Fishes Food Pantry of St. Blaise, Bellingham. UNO will donate twenty percent of your food purchase, dine-in or take-out, to the pantry during this day-long fundraising event. Tickets for the event are free and may be printed from the church’s website, www.stblaise.org.

With winter coming and the holidays quickly approaching, for many among us dependence upon the food pantry is at its highest. The Loaves and Fishes food pantry serves all of Bellingham and neighboring communities. It’s a great time to take a break from the kitchen and come together for some fun, great food and a good cause.

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