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Managing Athletes' Risk to Hot Weather

A sad, but all-too-common item in today's news media deals with athletes and their exposure to excessive summer temperatures. Minnesota Vikings player Korey Stringer, who died of heat stroke in 2001, brought the topic to national prominence, and a number of other serious heat-related incidents since then have reminded us that this is a topic deserving of the attention of parents, coaches and team administrators. In the summer months of 2011, as much of the country has seen record-breaking periods of extreme temperatures, at least three heat-related deaths on practice fields have been reported, as high school football season approached. These included two high-school football players from Georgia and a coach in Texas, who have died amid sweltering temperatures.

The injury or death of an athlete will almost inevitably raise questions about the team's program, which may result in a lawsuit against the team, the coaches, administrators and others. The nature of such a lawsuit will likely find its genesis in a claim of negligence against the defendants. Allowing for various jurisdictional differences, a successful claim for negligence will require the plaintiff to prove that the defendant(s) had a duty to the athlete, the defendant(s) breached that duty, the breach of the duty caused the injury (or death) to the athlete, and the plaintiff has suffered damages.

Simply stated, coaches and other individuals responsible for supervising athletes practicing or playing in extreme heat and/or humidity conditions need to observe caution, to avoid the risk of heat-related illnesses. This Topics sheet is intended to provide some general guidelines for teams to follow, to reduce their risk to the exposure of a heat-related incident.

1. Every team should develop or adopt some form of policy for dealing with the hot weather. This should include training for coaches, athletic trainers, and other staff. Training should include recognition of signs of distress and heat illness, and appropriate response techniques. Coaches and trainers should know the difference between the signs of heat exhaustion (symptoms which include heavy sweating, muscle cramps and spasms, headache, nausea, dizziness, and moist, pale skin that feels cool) and heat stroke (symptoms which include appearing flushed with dry, hot skin).

2. A means of measuring temperature and humidity levels should exist at the practice sites, along with established responses to thresholds when reached. For example, one state's athletic association advises coaches and marching band directors to take precautions when the heat index tops 95, and to cut off activities when that measure

hits 105, rescheduling the practice for a later day or later in the day. Another option may be to hold the practice at night, under lights, if the team can afford it. The WBGT (Wet Bulb Globe Temperature) Index is the most widely accepted measure of environmental conditions and is used as a monitoring guideline for activities in both athletics and industry. (More on this can be found at the Journal of Athletic Training's article, at <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1569552/>.)

3. Provide participants with frequent water breaks, and a trip to the scales at the beginning and end of each practice session. Some suggest that if a player's weight drops 3 percent or more, it's considered a sign of dehydration; losses of 5 percent could be seen as an indicator of heat-related illness.* Athletes should hydrate at least two days before games by drinking at least eight glasses of water a day for two days. While plain water is sufficient to replace fluids, athletes might drink more if the fluids are flavored and contain electrolytes and glucose.

4. Have an athletic trainer on the field at all times. That is, a person trained in sports medicine who not only can recognize the signs of heat-related issues but also treat them.

5. Be prepared for a heat stroke emergency, with body-cooling arrangements. If a heat illness is suspected, the athlete should be immediately removed from the hot environment, to a shady or air-conditioned area. Cold drinks should be provided, tight clothing loosened, and the person should be cooled by spraying or sponging with cool water.** An athlete who is immediately cooled can survive, but many coaches just call 911. It could be that while they wait for an ambulance the brain and vital organs

continue to cook in the heat, while the body can only withstand such extreme conditions for about 30 minutes.

6. Give athletes' bodies time to adjust, or acclimatize, to the environment and heat stresses. To decrease the number of heat-related illnesses, the National Collegiate Athletic Association recently instituted a mandatory 5-day acclimatization period. The athletic practices' intensity and duration should increase gradually, based on the time needed to acclimatize. (Most heat-related injuries to football players occur during the first three weeks of practice.) The National Athletic Trainers' Association provides detailed preseason heat-acclimatization guidelines for youth sports, which can be accessed at <http://www.nata.org/sies/default/files/HeatFactSheet.pdf>.

Athletics can be one of the most enriching components of a person's life. With the right cautionary practices, teams can provide this service, without compromising safety, and while minimizing the risk of a heat-related injury. We encourage you to incorporate the items above into your Safety & Loss Control program. If you would like a visit from your Hanover Insurance Group Loss Control Consultant, to address this or any other Safety or Health issue, please contact your insurance agent. Also, visit our website at www.HanoverLossControl.com, which provides a wealth of loss control information for our policyholders and agents.

References

* University Interscholastic League - <http://www.uiltexas.org/health/info/heat-stress-and-athletic-participation>

** Mayo Clinic - <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/first-aid-heat-exhaustion/FA00020>

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