



Getting a head start

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HESPERIA • A waiting room filled with football players at a doctor's clinic is probably the last place a football coach wants to see his team hanging out.

Especially on the last day of two-a-day practices in August.

But Serrano coach Ray Maholchic was not only supportive of his team invading Dr. T. Thomas Liu's office in Hesperia on Wednesday afternoon, he insisted on it.

The members of the Serrano football took the imPACT Test, short for Immediate Post-Concussion Assessment and Cognitive Testing, at the Southern California Bone and Joint Clinic in Hesperia. More than 80 varsity players were tested Wednesday with members of the freshman team set to get their tests done on Saturday.

The video-game like test measures and scores cognitive functions of each player. The test won't prevent concussions but it does help in diagnosing athletes following a head injury.

"As a football coach you don't want to miss a minute of practice time, but when you have an opportunity like this you don't pass it up," Maholchic said.

That opportunity came about when Liu, an orthopedic surgeon specializing in sports medicine, came to the High Desert in fall of 2010 and reached out to local high schools hoping to set up a testing program.

Serrano responded but couldn't work out logistics during the season. Maholchic recently brought up the idea to Snowline School District Superintendent Eric Johnston and it was approved.

"Money is so tight, we were just lucky enough that the school district thought they'd support us," Maholchic said.

The test cost about \$12 per athlete with about 150 Serrano players participating. The school district also paid to bus players out to the clinic.

"This is just great," Serrano head athletic trainer Sharice Ries said. "From an athletic trainer perspective, having them tested now and then should something happen, which we always pray that it doesn't, we have that baseline. That's invaluable information."

Liu worked with the NFL's Pittsburgh Steelers and NHL's Pittsburgh Penguins while doing his fellowship at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, and worked under Dr. Mark Lovell and Dr. Michael Collins, who helped write the NFL's concussion guidelines.

Although he displays a jersey signed by Penguins' star Sidney Crosby in his waiting room, it's high school football he really loves, which led him to reach out to local teams.

One-by-one players took the 20-minute test and then consulted with Liu.

"They sit you down at the computer and then you just go through and it's memorizing words and shapes," junior lineman Shawn Shanks said.

Serrano players Justin Vannatta, Zac Tuman and Shanks said they liked the idea of testing and added that their parents were fans of it too.

"I'm kind of concerned about it because (concussions) can be a life and death situation," Tuman said.

Due to their brains still maturing, teenagers are at particular risk for second impact syndrome, when the brain suffers two traumatic blows in a short period of time.

"If the kid had a concussion, there is a period of vulnerability of the brain," Liu said. "If they get hit again at that time there can be permanent damage. Especially with young athletes in high school they can sustain what's called second impact syndrome, which can leave them permanently disabled or die. It's literally a 50 percent chance of dying. A coin flip with your life is not something worth risking."

The test can help identify problems in brain functions after a concussion, but Liu and Ries said the most important part is having an open dialog with the athletes.

"It is ultimately them who have to come up to us and say 'Hey, something's wrong with me,'" Liu said. "They can try to hide a lot of stuff. There's so many people on the team, we may not catch it. If you try to hide it not only are you doing a disservice to the team because you are not playing at 100 percent, you are also taking chances with your brain and your life."

Maholchic, who is also Serrano's athletic director, said just football players are doing the testing now but would like to see it expanded. He mentioned possibly testing soccer players before the winter sports season starts.

Athletes from Victor Valley College also recently had the testing done.

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