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UCLA doesn't play around with concussions



By MARCIA C. SMITH
COLUMNIST
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER
masmith@ocregister.com

Story Highlights

UCLA doesn't play around with concussions.

LOS ANGELES - Black jerseys, which are worn at practice by UCLA starter Kevin Prince and the rest of the quarterbacks, mean "Caution." Blitzing defenders aren't supposed to tackle, touch, graze or even breathe too hard on these signal-callers.

That was especially the case Tuesday at Spaulding Field, where Prince returned to practice after being medically cleared for non-contact drills just four days after suffering a concussion in Saturday's Bruins victory over Washington.

"I'm all right, fine, and I feel normal," said Prince, who looked particular sharp during practice, hitting Taylor Embree on a deep corner route. "I'll play Saturday (at Washington State)."

But, given the serious nature of head trauma and the increasing awareness and research of the long-term effects of post-concussion syndrome, the decision on whether the redshirt freshman plays won't be his. Or head athletic trainer Anthony Venute's. Or offensive coordinator Norm Chow's. Or even Coach Rick Neuheisel's.

"He (Prince) was terrific in practice, no ill effects," Neuheisel said. "The doctors make all those decisions. But in terms of how he was and his alertness, he was exactly the same (as in previous practices)."

The only person who can clear Prince to play is John DiFiori, a sports medicine doctor who has evaluated concussions at UCLA since 1994.

"In the last 10 years, there has been a tremendous amount of understanding and clinical research ... that shows that these injuries to the brain have to be managed very carefully," DiFiori said. "There has been more awareness of the symptoms, the recognition of concussions, the course of recovery and the individual variations from player to player."

The days of routinely playing with "dingers," or "getting your bell rung," or "seeing stars," are no longer seen as testaments to toughness. Also gone are the days when coaches — not medical personnel — cleared players to return.

"Back when I played, we didn't use the word (concussion). I think it was called 'getting your bell rung,'" said Neuheisel, who played for UCLA from 1979 to 1983 and was quarterback his senior season. "People are being much more careful. Obviously it shows great progress that's we're looking after kids."

Last Saturday, in the second quarter against Washington, Prince scrambled for 8 yards on first-and-10 from the Huskies 28. He didn't slide but dove head-first, becoming vulnerable for an illegal helmet-to-helmet collision with 6-foot-1, 235-pound linebacker Donald Butler.

Butler was assessed a personal foul. Prince, who laid on the field for two minutes, didn't return to the game. On the sideline, trainers put him through a battery of neurocognitive tests "which I didn't really remember because I was fuzzy," Prince recalled.

He was asked where he was, whom he was playing and what the score was. He knew the answers.

Then he was asked to touch the tip of his nose and walk in a straight line, "like those tests they give drunk drivers," Prince said.

Next, Prince was asked to recite the months of the year backward and count back from 100 backward each time by 7. He was also given five words and had to recall them five minutes later.

"Some of those little things are hard to do even without a concussion," Prince said, grinning.

As a precaution, Prince left the game with the Huskies ahead, 16-14, but watched the Bruins come back for the 24-23 victory. He congratulated his backup, Kevin Craft, after the game and seemed slightly groggy but coherent in the postgame locker room.

That night the medical staff requested Prince stay at his Los Angeles home and have his parents wake him every two hours to make sure he did not fall into a deep sleep.

On Sunday, he said he felt no headaches and no lingering dizziness and did not vomit — all signs of a more serious concussion. On Monday, he attended classes and was again evaluated by doctors using a 20-minute computer test, which assesses memory, recall speed, brain processing and visual motor skills.

"I can tell them all I want, that I feel normal, but they won't believe me," said Prince, who had never experienced a concussion before. "I've got to prove it. ... They were serious about it, and I could tell they just wanted to take good care of me."

A few weeks ago, Bruins basketball guard Malcolm Lee was held out of practice for several days because of a suspected concussion. He had been playing full-court defense on an uncalled ball screen and, taking the hard pick, struck a teammate's shoulder in the head.

After the contact, Lee laid on the Pauley Pavilion court, looking at the ceiling that was spinning. He got up and continued playing, running sprint even, then began to experience headaches. He told Bruins coach Ben Howland, "I'm a little dizzy."

"We had a concussion test later and they said my results weren't so good," Lee recalled. "The next day, I felt like I could go (to practice) but the doctor said, 'No, you'll have to wait out.'"

Howland said he had watched Lee get hit "on the tape over and over" and didn't think Lee has suffered a concussion. But he's no doctor.

"It was determined that it would be prudent to hold him out of practice," Howland said. "They never want to mess around when it comes to a potential concussion. ... But I'm fine with whatever they tell us. They (Doctors) tell us what to do."

In the past decade, convincing research has shown that concussions, especially among young players and in contact sport as physical as football, can increase the likelihood of future concussions and have long-term effects on memory and the onset of dementia and depression.

Improved protective gear including air-cushioned helmets and mouth guards is preventative. But with the speed and size of today's football players, the collisions from an athlete running 20 miles per hour "would be equivalent to crashing a car into a brick wall going 40, 45 miles per hour," said prominent neurosurgeon and concussion researcher Dr. Robert Cantu.

The impact is noticeable but the injury is invisible, relying on athletes to self-report. And few players want to forfeit playing time by speaking up about an injury that only they can feel. Concealing symptoms might allow a concussed athlete back on the field too soon.

That's why the concern loomed over Tim Tebow, quarterback of top-ranked and undefeated Florida, who left a Sept. 26 game at Kentucky because of a concussion and returned for the Oct. 10 game at LSU.

That's also why criticism followed when Fresno State quarterback Ryan Colburn returned after missing just two plays in the Sept. 18 game against 10th-ranked Boise State. He had suffered a hard hit from a helmet-to-helmet collision on a critical fourth-and-4 scramble and was apparently not evaluated for concussion symptoms.

"We have great support from the athletic department in doing our job from the medical perspective so that we can do the best we can to manage the treatment of the student-athlete," said DiFiori, who knows that keeping an athlete safe involves more than wearing a black jersey.