

Schoolboy rugby players are getting bigger and bigger, and the game, at school level, is becoming more aggressive and injurious, sometimes with lethal consequences. Helen Grange investigates.

It felt like running into a ton of bricks. This is how a 12-year-old Dirk* from Alberton described the tackle – in a school rugby match against an older boy – that ended up splitting his bicep bone to the shoulder.

The boy Dirk tackled was a good 20kgs heavier than him, and a year or two older, says his father Christo*. But the real tragedy was yet to happen. In hospital during surgery Dirk contracted a flesh eating bacteria which has resulted in his arm and part of his shoulder being amputated.

Still reeling in shock, Christo* admitted tearfully last week his boy has had to undergo extensive psychotherapy to cope with the trauma, but cruelly compounding the pain is that while allegations against the hospital are aired, Christo feels bound to silence regarding the significant differences in boys' weights on the rugby field that day.

“The teams should have been matched more evenly, and the school had an obligation to oversee this, but if I say anything against rugby, I will have not one friend in Alberton,” he said.

In another incident shortly afterwards, Kobus Engelbrecht was playing fullback for the Hoërskool Linden 2nd XV against Hoërskool Riebeeck from Randfontein, when in a loose scrum, Kobus' neck vertebra five and six were displaced. His spinal cord was damaged and bone from his hip had to be transplanted. Initially, he had no feeling from his neck down, but he can now lift his left arm.

Since the rugby season began, Johannesburg doctors have treated over 250 serious rugby related injuries, five of them critical.

Dr Jon Patricios, a physician who runs sports concussion clinics, says his Johannesburg clinic had already managed 158 cases of schoolboy concussion only weeks into this year's season. These events poignantly reflect the dangers inherent in rugby, but perhaps more cynically, the pressure in conservative, rugby-focused communities to avoid controversy around such injuries.

The attitude among many diehard rugby administrators is that the official age groupings are sufficient and that the weaker boys will be weeded out naturally. As Christo Meyer, chairman of the Golden Lions High Schools Association puts it, “Rugby is nie 'n sitkamer spel nie.” (Rugby isn't a sitting room game!).

Certainly, rugby is a tough contact sport that by nature prizes bravery, a quality that is constantly reinforced with inside banter like: “The harder you go in, the less you get hurt!”. Injuries will always be an inherent risk in the game, and many rugby officials feel strongly to soften the game in any way to accommodate smaller boys will destroy the very essence of it. To understand the risks of rugby injuries, it's sobering to look at how and why most of them happen.

Concussion, followed by a second blow to the head before the brain has recovered, is thought to be particularly significant among young players and is suspected to have been the cause of several deaths on school playing fields.

Head and neck injuries, mostly incurred in scrums, are particularly prevalent in rugby, as are knee ligament injuries, says well-known sports physiotherapist Evan Speechly.

A significant factor in these injuries is players' differing weights; there is no control over how heavy a boy is in a team.

Speechly says he's noticed that schoolboy rugby players are getting bigger and bigger, part of the reason being the abuse of nutritional supplements and steroids according to sports physician Dr Jon Patricios.

Speechly suggests we follow the example of New Zealand rugby, which has dramatically minimized injuries, by up to 82%, over the past five years, due to the introduction of a compulsory programme called RugbySmart.

Aside from the fact that players there are grouped by weight as opposed to age, the programme emphasizes to coaches that players must be adequately prepared for the position they play in, including having seen videos on correct and incorrect techniques for scrum play and tackling.

That said, at some point, boys graduate to senior rugby, “and the 80kg backline player will inevitably come up against the 140kg prop”, Speechly notes.

“The important thing is that the rugby administrators don't allow mismatches, that teams with similar strengths compete with each other.”

Speechly says he has tried, with minimal success, to introduce 'grappling coaches' to schools to teach the correct tackling techniques.

“The All Blacks, French and the Sharks have all started these techniques, not only to make them better players, but to minimize injuries. Schoolboys watch Super 14 games, see the big tackles and try and emulate them. If they don't have the right techniques and strength, they are likely to get hurt,” he says.

Interestingly, the use of headgear can actually add to the risk, as it makes players feel invincible as they dive into tackles.

“The headgear offers absolutely no protection other than to minimize facial lacerations,” Speechly says.

Another worrying factor is the psychological pressure to win – exerted by coaches and parents. “Donder hom, Dirkie!”, “Looi hom, Jannie!”, “Kill him if he does that again, my boy!”, are typical of the shrill directives of rugby parents from the stands as their boys shoulder into a scrum or barge into a tackle.

In a letter that Dr Patricios wrote for the SuperSchools website, he says: “Over-enthusiastic fathers, paranoid that their sons may lose out on a university bursary, are determined to see their boys through the season despite serious injury; the relief I see on a boy's face when you prescribe a period of rest to recover from injury, the stretch marks, swollen nipples and rampant acne of the anabolic steroid user; the 13-year-old asking what supplements he should be drinking for a rugby physique! All of these scenarios are playing themselves out with alarming frequency.”

Also, many schools are rated according to how they perform on the sports field, which makes the game disproportionately competitive, Patricios says.

Patricios wants to see an end to knockout regional and national school rugby competitions, which he says will “lift the lid off the 'win at all costs' pressure cooker. He also wants to see more rigorous anti-doping programmes at school level, and also an immediate stop to the contracting of under 18 schoolboys by the rugby unions to fast-track them into professional rugby, which he says spoils the more natural, character-building progression of traditional youth club rugby.

Speechly adds that the standard of referees, who can often prevent a potential injury when the game gets rough, also needs to be seriously looked at.

Patricios' conclusion in the SuperSchools letter is edifying indeed.

“It is time to address the year-round training, the mental and physical stresses, professional

contracting, supplement and drugs abuse that has permeated the South African schoolboy game. Let us create a system that encourages our young men to play to live, not live to play.”