

Evidence for Adoption of a Face Mask Requirement for Softball Infielders

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My name is Allyson Barefield and I am a softball player from the Starkville School District. I would like to take this opportunity to present evidence regarding the safety issues associated with infielders not wearing a fielding mask. I would like to present evidence from three areas. First are the numbers and types of injuries resulting from high school softball. Second are the regulations from other states. Finally, I will present the opinions of Mississippi coaches regarding this important topic.

Injury Discussion

Of the 680 softball-related injuries reported in the 2017 National Electronic Injury Surveillance System database (<https://www.cpsc.gov>) for girls 14 to 18 years of age, 116 of these (17.1 percent or almost one in five) were injuries involving the face, mouth, or head. A sampling of narratives associated with the incidence reports include

- *17 YOF (year old female) HIT ON THE FACE WITH A SOFTBALL. DX EPISTAXIS (acute hemorrhage from the nostril, nasal cavity or nasopharynx – CPSC Case Number 170115117)*
- *16 YOF HIT ON HEAD X2 WITH BALL AT SOFTBALL PRACTICE – CONCUSSION (CPSC Case Number 170342122)*
- *15 YOF CONCUSSION HEAD – HIT WITH SOFTBALL (CPSC Case Number 170740211)*
- *16 YOF PLAYING SOFTBALL WHEN A GROUNDER BOUNCED ONCE HIT PT IN RIGHT EYE – DX CLOSED FRACTURE ORBITAL FLOOR (CPSC Case Number 170807969)*
- *14 YOF CONCUSSION HEAD – PLAYING SOFTBALL (CPSC Case Number 171071414)*
- *18YOF HIT IN THE FACE WITH SOFTBALL – DX FX (fracture) OF NASAL BONES (CPSC Case Number 170213667)*

While not all of these injuries may have been avoided by the use of a face mask, a cursory examination of the diagnosis narratives associated with these injuries reveals that a large number of these injuries could very well have been avoided or their severity reduced if a face mask had been used. Dr. Dawn Comstock, a leading national expert on the incidence of high school sports injuries in the United States, reports that there were close to 8,000 girls who received a concussion from playing softball in 2013¹.

In addition, there are many stories in the local, state, and national press regarding severe head, face, and mouth injuries. A few of the more recent ones include

¹ Softballers Face A Fielder's Choice: When To Wear A Face Mask? **National Public Radio**. May 18, 2014. <https://www.npr.org/2014/05/18/313696131/softballers-face-a-fielders-choice-when-to-wear-a-face-mask>

- “Didi Duran, for one, knows what it’s like to take a softball to the forehead. During a game last December, the 18-year-old senior at Ferris High School had crept in from her position at third base, preparing for a bunt, when the batter hit a line drive straight at her. “I didn’t think she was going to hit it as hard she did,” Duran said. ... An ambulance rushed Duran to a hospital. ... Her mom, Lisa, says that for months Duran had trouble getting down the stairs.” Softballers Face A Fielder’s Choice: When To Wear A Face Mask? **National Public Radio**. May 18, 2014. <https://www.npr.org/2014/05/18/313696131/softballers-face-a-fielders-choice-when-to-wear-a-face-mask>
- “According to the coaches, the girl was initially knocked out cold when a stray ball tossed by the catcher hit her in the head.” Softball player hospitalized after pre-game accident at W.A. **The Wilcox Progressive Era**. March 24, 2018. <https://www.thewilcoxprogressiveera.com/2018/03/24/breaking-545-p-m-friday-softball-player-hospitalized-after-pre-game-accident-at-w-a/>
- “Union County senior pitcher Evyn Hendrickson was hit with a line drive right to the face. She turned and instantly fell down screaming. It was scary said Courtney [Patterson]. Evyn was not wearing a face mask and she is the third girl in the region in a month to get hit in the face. Players React To Softball Accident. **Tristate homepage.com**. May 7, 2017. <https://www.tristatehomepage.com/news/local-news/players-react-to-softball-accident/692653954>
- “[Ally] Bruner, a junior, was not wearing a protective mask when she was hit just above the right eye with a softball during a game on April 21. She was taken to Decatur Memorial Hospital, then transferred to Memorial in Springfield where she received three titanium plates and 25 screws in her head.” Injury turns focus to protective masks for softball. **Pantagraph.com** https://www.pantagraph.com/sports/high-school/softball/injury-turns-focus-to-protective-masks-for-softball/article_cae0c216-4bd5-5c60-a18d-84ba29d0f8da.html

Furthermore, Bob Cook, a contributing author for *Forbes* magazine, described the differences between injuries of high school softball players and baseball players as reported in the National High School Sports-Related Injury Surveillance Study. He reported that softball had a greater rate of overall injuries (1.46 per 1,000 athlete-exposures for softball versus 0.83 for baseball), a greater percentage of head and neck injuries (30.8% to 21.5%), a greater rate of concussions (21.2% to 14.6%), and a greater rate of injuries that occurred while fielding a batted ball (28.5% to 18.9%). He argued that many of these injuries would have been eliminated had infielders been required to wear face masks.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/bobcook/2014/07/18/should-softball-players-wear-masks-on-the-field-at-least-one-state-says-yes/#570dbd361892>)

Regulations in Other States

The issue of softball infielders being required to wear face masks has been an issue of debate since at least 2014 (Kentucky and Iowa were two states that were strongly considering implementing regulations requiring infielder face masks for the 2014 season although neither state's high school athletics association passed the regulation for that season).

Missouri was the first state to enact regulations regarding the issue. The 2017 Missouri State High School Activities Association manual stated that all pitchers had to wear face masks while playing. Missouri was the first state to recognize and pass a law dealing with face masks for any position other than catcher. Even though Missouri does not require first and third base to wear a face mask, they strongly encourage it.

While there has likely been some negative reaction to Missouri's implementation of the regulations, most press coverage and coaches' reactions have been positive. Stories from the *Springfield News-Leader*² and the *Gazette Xtra*³ have praised the regulation as being extremely positive for the sport.

While not implementing this type of safety rule in 2014, Kentucky not only followed Missouri in addressing the issue, but also expanded the scope of the players who are affected by the rule. The Kentucky High School Athletic Association stated that at the beginning of the 2018 season pitchers, first basemen and third basemen were required to wear a face mask. The KHSAA proposed to amend the National Federation of High Schools playing rules at the 2017 NFHS summer meeting, but the recommendation was opposed nationally at the time.

Thus, there are only two states that require face masks in any position on the infield: Missouri and Kentucky. Missouri only requires pitchers to wear face masks, while Kentucky requires the pitcher, first base and third base positions to wear face masks. However, there are individual coaches and athletic directors that have superseded their state regulatory bodies to require the use of the masks by infielders. Examples of this include Quincy High School (Illinois) coach Eric Hoke who requires all infielders to wear face masks⁴ and Richardson Independent School District (Texas) athletic director Bob Dubey who requires third basemen to wear face masks⁵.

² . "New rule: Face masks required for high school softball pitchers in Missouri." *Springfield News-Leader*. July 12, 2017. <https://www.news-leader.com/story/sports/high-school/2017/07/12/new-rule-face-masks-required-high-school-softball-pitchers-missouri/472630001/>

³ "Protective masks [are] becoming the norm on the softball field." *GazetteXtra.com*. April 26, 2018. https://www.gazetteextra.com/sports/high_school/softball/protective-masks-becoming-the-norm-on-the-softball-field/article_bbc277e-4dff-5234-a7c2-8be889260ad0.html

⁴ To wear them or not?: The face mask debate in softball continues. *Herald-Whig*. December 29, 2018. <https://www.whig.com/story/14578077/to-wear-them-or-not-the-face-mask-debate-in-softball-continues#>

⁵ Softballers Face A Fielder's Choice: When To Wear A Face Mask? *National Public Radio*. May 18, 2014. <https://www.npr.org/2014/05/18/313696131/softballers-face-a-fielders-choice-when-to-wear-a-face-mask>

Views of Mississippi Coaches

While the views and actions of governing bodies, coaches and athletic directors in other states are important to understand the issue, it is even more important to understand the views of Mississippians who would be some of the most affected by the rule's implementation – softball coaches in Mississippi.

To determine where Mississippi softball coaches stand on this important safety issue, I conducted a survey of Mississippi High School Softball Coaches asking them about four important topics in a series of 10 questions. The anonymous online survey was sent to 174 coaches whose emails were obtained from the 2018-2019 Mississippi Association of Coaches Membership Directory. Eleven of these emails were returned. Sixty-two coaches participated in the survey (a response rate of 38%).

Given that the face mask rule for infielders is not in effect in Mississippi, the first question asked "Do you currently require any of your infielders to wear a face mask?" Seventeen coaches (27.42%) responded yes to this question. There were two follow-up questions. To the question "If Yes, which ones?", coaches were asked to identify the infielders that they require to wear a face mask. Even though only 17 coaches indicated that they required some players to wear a face mask in Question 1, 26 coaches answered this follow-up question. Of these 26 coaches,

- 24 coaches (92.31%) require pitchers to wear a face mask;
- 17 coaches (65.38%) require third basemen to wear a face mask;
- 8 coaches (30.77%) require first basemen to wear a face mask;
- 7 coaches (26.92%) require shortstops to wear a face mask; and
- 6 coaches (19.23% require second basemen to wear a face mask.

The other follow up to Question 1 was "If No, do any of your players currently wear a face mask?" Sixty coaches answered this question with 55 (91.67%) indicating that at least one of their players wore a face mask.

Question 4 asked, "Would you support an MHSAA rule requiring specific infielders to wear a face mask?" Forty-nine coaches (79.03%) said they would. Thirteen coaches (20.97%) said they would not.

Question 5 asked, "If a rule were to be passed, which infielders do you think should be required to wear a mask?" Of these 61 coaches:

- 36 coaches (59.02%) said first should be required to wear a face mask
- 16 coaches (26.23%) said second should be required to wear a face mask
- 51 coaches (83.61%) said third should be required to wear a face mask
- 20 coaches (32.79%) said shortstop should be required to wear a face mask
- 58 coaches (95.08%) said pitcher should be required to wear a face mask

Question 6 asked, “Has any of your team suffered from an injury that could have been prevented by wearing a face mask?” Seventeen coaches (27.42%) said that they have seen a player on their team been hit by a ball that could have been prevented by wearing a mask.

Question 7 asked, “How many times have your players been struck by a ball in the head or neck area (the area that would be protected by a mask) in the last 5 years?”

- 51 coaches (83.61%) said that their players have been struck 0-5 times by the ball
- 8 coaches (13.11%) said that their players have been struck 5-10 times by the ball
- 2 coaches (3.28%) said that their players have been struck 10-15 times by the ball

In Question 8, I provided five factors that I thought might be the major deterrents to players wearing a mask and then asked the coaches to “Rank these factors as deterrents to player voluntarily choosing to wear a mask:” The highest ranked deterrents were identified by the coaches as visibility (3.40 out of a possible score of 5.0) and comfort (3.37/5.0). The third highest ranking deterrent was vanity (3.12/5.0) while the lowest two deterrents were cost (2.56/5.0) and availability (2.51/5.0).

Question 9 asked “Do you feel that there are other issues deterring infielders from wearing a mask?” Of the 48 coaches who answered this question, 40 had no other thoughts about additional deterrents. The comments of the other 7 coaches included:

- I have seen some coaches make fun of girls for wearing them, as if they were not confident enough of their defensive ability or treating them like tee ball players.
- They have a glove.
- I think many think it’s a sign of weakness
- I feel that many kids do not grow up wearing a mask so they are not comfortable to them. Also I have seen through the years that the younger generation of players are wearing a mask more and more. One thing I would consider is that most players in college do not wear a mask!
- Outside the program coaxing. Travel ball coaches.
- Movement/stability of face mask. Constant readjustment.
- I think some may feel they are less talented or feel inadequate wearing one. I think this is the exact reason front line defenders need them.

The final question asked, “Do you have any comments regarding the issue of infielders wearing face masks?” Thirty coaches entered a substantive response to this question and each of these responses are listed in the appendix to this report. Twenty-five of these responses indicated that the individual coach believes that a mandatory face mask rule would be beneficial to the high school game while the other five comments did not explicitly favor this type of rule.

Conclusions

The responses to my survey of Mississippi high school softball coaches, combined with the other evidence presented at the beginning of this report, points to the benefit of implementing

a rule that would make it mandatory for softball infielders to wear face masks in practice and in games for Mississippi High School Activities Association schools, even though the National Federation of High Schools Rules Committee did not approve the proposal for the entire nation. I think this rule needs to be put in place because there have been several incidents that I have seen in the practices and games with my team and the people that we have played where a player was either wearing a mask and it stopped her from having been more injured than she was or she had an accident that could likely have been prevented by wearing a mask. Wearing a mask can prevent long term damages, like having to have surgery or even brain damage. There will be accidents no matter what we do, but we need to at least attempt to put a stop to the many avoidable

injuries that happen to the head that could cause damage to the brain and other majors areas by wearing a mask.

Thank you for reading and I hope you will decide to move toward making face masks mandatory for infielders for MHSAA member schools.

Appendix

“Do you have any comments regarding the issue of infielders wearing face masks?”

Comments favoring a mandatory face mask rule

- I would welcome the rule. I think it is a common sense rule that can protect girls from deadly accidents. twice in my coaching career, I have seen pitchers leave the field in an ambulance from getting struck in the face by a softball. one was a college age kid playing tment ball in southaven, that had her eye socket shattered, the other got hit between the eyes and almost died on the field. she had to have a steel plate put in her forehead. So yes, i think this is a rule that should have been put in place years ago. thanks you for taking a lead on this, maybe since this is coming from a player it will have more of an impact than from us coaches.
- I would like for my players to wear them
- Safety is always first and being preventive is key.
- I not only require infielders to wear a mask, but outfielders also.
- I have been requiring all of my infieldsers to wear mask for the last 5 years. in that time we have had 4 or 5 take balls off of the mask that would have otherwise resulted in injury. some of my players that didnt want to wear a mask when I started requiring it later came to me and thanked me for requiring it. whether they got hit in the mask or not they actually felt more secure playing the infield after they got used to the mask
- I think it's a great idea...
- Most issues would soon disappear if it became mandatory.
- I think corners and pitchers should definitely be required to wear face masks. Just this last week, (I require my pitchers to wear face masks) our pitcher was hit hard by a line drive in the jaw. Because she had on her face mask, it was just sore. No broken jaw, however, if she wasn't wearing it I would hate to see the injuries she would have sustained.
- I would feel more comfortable if all infielders wore mask.
- If you think you need one, wear one. I believe the pitcher should always wear one being only 45 feet from the plate.
- I personally would like a rule where the pitcher had to wear them.
- I would be ok with pitchers and 3rd base having to wear one. I think short, 2nd, & 1st should be left to individual players
- I'm for a rule.
- I think it would be a good rule to add mainly for the players safety.
- Most players in college do not wear a mask. I think by wearing a mask especially on the infield at all positions besides first base would eliminate the fear of injury for many players
- I do believe face masks would create a safer environment for our players.
- I would agree that it is an issue that needs to be addressed

- I think they should.
- I think they should be required. My infielders wear face masks. If they have a face mask, we do not allow them to practice without it.
- I believe all infielders should be required to wear one.
- I think that it could be a good idea for pitchers to wear one, but I don't think it is as necessary for other fielders.
- No brainer for me. Corners and pitchers should wear them.
- It's a good idea for pitchers to have to wear them
- I think it's a great idea!
- I believe at least the pitcher, 3rd and 1st should be required.

Comments not explicitly favoring a mandatory face mask rule

- Accidents happen - I think that there are incidents in which they are more likely to happen. We lack education on these issues and people are not aware of the overall consequences of a traumatic head injury, just that they want to protect their teeth because they spent so much money on them, etc.
- This is an issue that was brought up at the NFCA convention last week in Chicago. Several coach believe it should be a choice. I believe that also. My daughter wore one year at the juco level as a pitcher and did not wear it at the D-I level. Face mask do not have any stamped approval. No one will without a helmet attached.
- It should be optional, many players cannot adjust to the visual differences that a makes causes
- I don't think any player should HAVE to wear a mask.
- Should be left up to the players