

KANSAS CONNECTIONS

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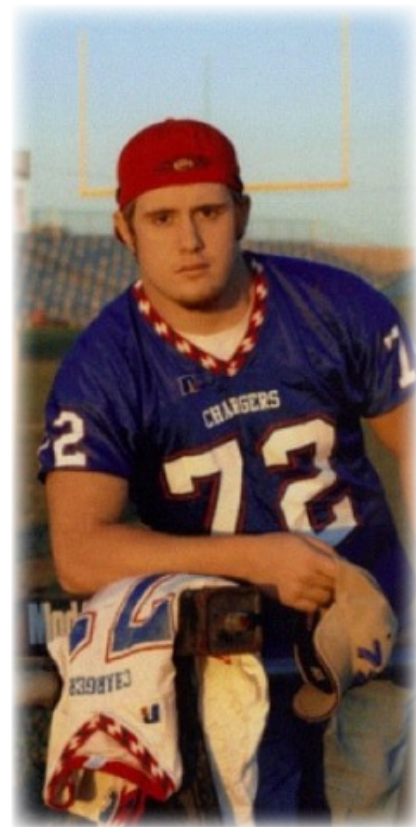
Twenty-one-year-old Brandan Downs has an extra pair of sunglasses stashed in most of his friends' and family members' cars to ensure he always has a pair on hand. It may seem like a small thing, but it's one of the details Downs has to remember due to eye sensitivity from lasting effects of multiple concussions.

Downs began playing tackle football in second grade. He sustained his first concussion in fifth grade and had four additional recorded concussions over the years.

"They were all different," Downs said of his concussions. "I noticed after my last one that it was harder for me to read, I noticed having to make adjustments. I had a bunch of other issues and I've had friends who have had a lot more problems than me."

Downs chose to end his football career in 2010, fresh into the start of his second season of college football.

"I didn't want to come to the point where if I had one more big hit, it would be one too many," said Downs. "I couldn't do that to my parents. Concussions shouldn't be



Brandan Downs in his football gear in 2009. Downs chose to end his college football career in 2010 after multiple concussions.

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taken lightly. I know a lot of people who probably had concussions and didn't get them checked out because they wanted to keep playing. It's your own life, that's your choice. But I know for me, I couldn't just let it be one more hit until the end."

"Sometimes an athlete is not aware of the risk he or she is taking by playing through symptoms and that awareness needs to continue to improve."

Jennifer Scott Koontz, M.D.

As a college athlete, Downs became a patient of Jennifer Scott Koontz, M.D., a primary care sports medicine physician with Newton Medical Center.

"In my experience, the sooner an athlete rests after experiencing a concussion, the lower the chance they will struggle long-term with concussion symptoms," said Koontz. "Sometimes an athlete is not aware of the risk he or she is taking by playing through symptoms and that awareness needs to continue to improve."

Awareness and Education

In 2011, Koontz joined a group of dedicated experts from around the state to form the Kansas Sports Concussion Partnership (KSCP). Sponsored by the Kansas Medical Society and coordinated by the Medical Society of Sedgwick County (MSSC), the Kansas Sports Concussion Partnership has developed materials to educate physicians, coaches, schools, and families about concussions.

The materials are now available at www.KansasConcussion.org.

"One of my biggest goals in being a part of the KSCP is to eliminate any confusion in the management of a concussion," said Koontz. "I want everyone on the entire team to be able to identify a possible concussion and know the next steps that need to be taken to achieve the best possible outcomes. We may not be able to live in a world where absolutely zero concussions occur, but I think we can continue to work to improve our care to minimize adverse consequences."

While Koontz often is contacted early on, Bart A. Grelinger, M.D., a neurologist with Neurology Consultants of Kansas in Wichita, has seen how there can be a delay in athletes seeking help.

"Unfortunately by the time I see patients in my neurology practice, the injury has already begun to cause them problems at home, in school, at work, and with their relationships," said Grelinger, who serves as the

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Bart A. Grelinger, M.D.

KSCP chair. "I have had several high school students who have missed a semester or more of school or dropped their dreams of going to college, due to memory and cognitive difficulties, following mild traumatic brain injury or concussion."

According to KSCP, "a concussion is the most common form of head injury suffered by athletes." Anyone, male or female, can sustain a concussion and it can happen as a result of a variety of sports and activities.

The KSCP website provides additional explanation about concussion: "It is a form of traumatic brain injury



Bart A. Grelinger, M.D.



Jennifer Scott Koontz, M.D.

that occurs when the brain is violently jarred back and forth or rotated inside the skull as a result of a blow to the head or body. This can 'stun' the brain cells or even result in their death. You do not need to lose consciousness to suffer a concussion. Symptoms may appear immediately or develop over several days. They may last a few days to several months and interfere with schoolwork and social life."

Recognizing and acting on the early signs and giving the brain and central nervous system a chance to recover are vitally important. Educa-

tion about removing the athlete from harm's way and preventing a second injury during the recovery process are part of the primary mission of the KSCP.

"Should a second injury occur before the systems are 'back online,' this second—possibly even milder injury—may cause a much greater and potentially-permanent injury, disability, or even death," said Grelinger. "Putting our athletes and children at risk before their brains are ready to control the next injury is careless, and once understood, unconscionable."

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“I would much rather see people sit out than take a hit that could end it.”

Brandan Downs

Precaution and Understanding

“When in doubt, sit it out,” said Koontz.

It’s a principle that can be difficult for athletes and coaches to accept when the game is on the line or they aren’t sure if a break is necessary.

“A lot of people get upset if they have to sit out,” said Downs. “I would much rather see people sit out than take a hit that could end it.”

For Downs, the multiple concussions left long-lasting effects but also a plan on using his past to his benefit. Downs is currently studying exercise science at Wichita State University and he hopes to use his perspective to coach and train athletes in a safer way to play.

“I want to become a coach for little kids,” said Downs. “I want to teach them to tackle right.”

Koontz said she is encouraged by the increased awareness and understanding that coaches and athletes are showing and what it means for those who could be affected by a concussion.

“It is great to see a coach recognize that a student may have a headache, dizziness, balance difficulty or confusion and pull him or her out of the game,” said Koontz. “It is extremely important that we continue to spread the message that a concussion, even though it is not always visible, is a very serious injury that can often be treated successfully with good and immediate treatment.”

THE HISTORY AND PURPOSE OF www.KansasConcussion.org

Prompted by a concern raised by urologist and father Jay Gilbaugh, Jr., M.D., in 2010, the Medical Society of Sedgwick County (MSSC) Board of Directors approved contacting the Kansas State High School Activities Association (KSHAA) about better protecting athletes.

This action started discussion and formation of what would eventually become the Kansas Sports Concussion Partnership (KSCP).

KSCP chair Bart A. Grelinger, M.D.—a Wichita neurologist with Neurology Consultants of Kansas, who has more than 20 years in practice—explained what led him to get involved in this project and to advocate for the state law that is now in place.

“I have had the opportunity to lecture locally and nationally on concussion and mild traumatic brain injury for the past 10 years or more.

“A little over a year ago I became aware that Travis Francis, a local athletic trainer, had proposed a bill in Topeka [Senate Bill 33: School Sports Head Injury Prevention Act] designed to have concussed athletes and students evaluated by a physician prior to returning to practice or game play. With this I was given a chance to testify at the State Senate, helping to get this bill passed. This bill became a state law late last spring.

“While preparing for my testimony, I had a chance to review the large volume of rapidly-changing material on sports head injury on the internet and found it daunting. It became clear we needed to help simplify this process for the physicians who would be dealing with this directly. With the help of the medical society, interested parties were gathered from multiple specialties including: family practice, sports medicine, surgery, emergency medicine, neurology, neuropsychology, athletic training, and nursing.

“During this process we chose the name Kansas Sports Concussion Partnership as we were setting up a website [www.KansasConcussion.org]. Hopefully this website provides up to date, accurate, and brief synopsis of all the currently available information. This not only provides education for the physician who may need to brush up on this topic but also provides tools to:

1. Help recognize concussion, allowing them to remove these students from further injury.
2. Monitor and manage the athlete as they improve.
3. Help return them back to the classroom and active play.

“The partnership plans to review the literature yearly and make any changes necessary to keep this website as current and useful as possible. It currently includes information for physicians, coaches and athletic trainers, teachers, schools, nurses, parents, and athletes.

“As physicians, our goal is the health of our patients, our state and our society. Education may be the most powerful tool we have to help reduce concussions in sports and limit potential disability.”

