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Sports

New law will help protect athletes from dangers of concussion

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Rowan Stringer posing for a photo posted on her Facebook page a month before her death in 2013 from acquiring a traumatic brain injury from two consecutive concussions.

By **Jessica Clement**

BELLEVILLE – Through loss came new hope for the safety of Ontario athletes, as Rowan’s Law passed its third reading in the legislature.

The untimely death of 17-year-old Rowan Stringer shook the sports community after she passed away in 2013 from brain trauma caused by a concussion. The legislation introduced by Ottawa Conservative MPP Lisa MacLeod will put the province at the forefront in responding to brain trauma as a result of sports. New protocol for the removal and return of young athletes who have sustained a concussion will be set in place as a result of the bill. The legislature will resume sitting in February.

“Everybody loves sports, but they’re not worth dying over,” Kurstyn Brant, a seasoned Loyalist varsity basketball player, said.

Since joining her first team in the Grade 8, Brant has suffered from at least three concussions, something she said coaches and players don’t take lightly. One of these head injuries put her out of the game for two months, after being flipped over another player’s knee during a game at Loyalist and losing consciousness after her head took a heavy hit on the court floor.



Kurstyn Brant (right) during Algonquin Thunders versus Loyalist Lancers basketball game January 15, 2016. *Photo by Loyalist Lancers.*

“I was about to be cleared,” she said, reflecting on nearing the end of her two months on the bench, “so I started playing a little in practices again. But I got clipped in the face with a ball and my coach said ‘that’s it.’”

He couldn’t risk Brant receiving a second concussion before the first had completely healed – something that could have taken her life as it did Stringers. Young athletes in particular are at risk to **Second Impact Syndrome**, which causes brain herniation and death, sometimes within a few minutes. If SIS isn’t fatal, it leaves behind similar results to that of a severe traumatic brain injury. In 2013, Stringer received her first concussion on the field on May 3, her second on May 6, and was taken off of life support May 12.

Stringer’s death marked the beginning of a wave of safety mandates throughout Ontario school boards and the passing of the Rowan’s Law **Advisory Committee Act** in 2016. Through these efforts, Ontario became the first province to establish a policy that specifically deals with concussions that occur at school. However, it is up to MacLeod’s progress in the legislature to stretch Rowan’s Law regulations to community-based sports leagues.

If the bill is passed, mandatory regulations would include:

- Annual reviews of concussion awareness resources to help prevent, identify and manage concussions. All coaches, educators and parents would be required to review these resources before registering in a sport.
- Removal-from-sport and return-to-sport protocols to ensure athletes suspected of concussion are immediately removed from the game/practice, giving the athlete ample time to recover.
- A concussion code of conduct that will lay out rules of behaviour to minimize concussions while playing sports.



Ottawa Conservative MPP Lisa MacLeod speaking in the Legislature during the passing of the third reading of Rowan’s Law, June 2016. *Photo credit: Ontario Parliament live streams.*

Athletics departments already have their own concussion protocols according to the head coach of Loyalist's varsity women's rugby team. Ken Fitzgerald said these were established prior to Rowan's Law being introduced.

"As soon as (the player, coaches or refs) suspect a head injury, we have the player assessed," he said.

"The athletic department is great at making sure we follow the right protocols for that."

Bryan Dunham, Loyalist's athletic therapist, has all of the college's athletes complete a baseline impact test at the beginning of the season. He said the results from this test can be used to compare results collected after an athlete is suspected of sustaining a head injury. From there, the player is monitored and slowly eased back into the sport over weeks or months based on their healing process after a concussion.

The real benefit that Rowan's Law offers is more education for parents and players, according to Fitzgerald. He said it is up to the athletes and coaches to work together when it comes to spotting the symptoms and warning signs of a head injury.

"A lot of the women on the team play with pride and a lot of passion, and may say 'I'm okay, Coach, I'm going back out', but it's not their call," Fitzgerald said. Another reason why Dunham said he attends every one of the college's games.

Although athletes in all branches of sports encounter their own set of risks, coaches and players agreed that safety starts at the grassroots level. For Brant, she said this comes in the form of being aware of her surrounding on the court. Fitzgerald said for the women on his rugby team, it's knowing how to fall when they're being tackled on the field.

"It's probably 85 per cent of the first two or three practices. Chin to chest, making sure your head doesn't whip."

Because of players knowing safety techniques, Fitzgerald said only a handful of the women he coaches have actually sustained a concussion while playing for the team. Out of all of the athletics teams at the college, Dunham said he only has to treat approximately five to 10 players for concussions a year.

When Rowan's Law is officially passed, these members of Loyalist's sports community all say they hope the rise in concussion awareness will be an extra push towards the safety and prevention among varsity and community-based athletes.

For Rowan Stringer's story and access to the petition backing Rowan's Law visit:

rowanslaw.ca.