

## **FIRST DAY OF SUMMER PRACTICE**

**You've Already Beat If You Have To Treat – By Times Correspondent, John Doherty**

Today marks the start of summer practices for high school athletes across Indiana. Their counterparts in Illinois will join them in nine days.

And while the first official opponent on their schedules won't show up before Aug. 13, the past tells us an unseen and more dangerous foe lurks daily at every practice this time of year.

Six years ago, that enemy was all too successful on four occasions in the space of just two weeks. The victims were football players Rashidi Wheeler of Northwestern, Eraste Autin of the University of Florida, Korey Stringer of the Minnesota Vikings and Travis Stowers of Clinton Central High School in Indiana.

If you can't recall these tragedies, then refresh your memory.

In each case, there were one or more contributing causes, in addition to the heat, which led to the athlete's death: a medical condition, use of a drug, previous episode of less severe heat illness, and/or alleged negligence on the part of caregivers.

In the aftermath of these heat-related deaths, lawsuits were filed. Some were successful, some failed, and some were settled before trial. But nobody won.

Administrators, athletic trainers, coaches and physicians all were under fire.

Many switched jobs voluntarily or otherwise. In fact, each program has changed head coaches since those fateful two weeks.

Although one, Randy Walker of Northwestern, would still probably be in place had he not died of a heart attack in June 2006.

None of those repercussions would have been necessary had there been a little foresight and preparedness on the part of the athletes, athletic trainers, and/or coaches involved.

If you look at the history of fatal heat illness in sports, you won't find a single incident involving more than one player at a time from a particular team. No matter how hot it is, chances are it's going to be *too* hot for only one athlete. Forecasting who that will be, though, is difficult but not impossible.

Consequently, rather than trying to find the proverbial needle in the haystack, administrators and coaches are better off moving the whole haystack. Change the conditions so they favor you, and you won't have to worry so much about a catastrophic case of heat illness.

Forecasting when you need to do that is easy. Just turn to a professional forecaster -- the weatherman.

At this time of year, practice schedules need to be flexible. It's a sliding scale. If it's hot but dry (e.g. 94 F but only 40 percent relative humidity) then practice needn't be changed much. However, if the weather is like it was on Saturday morning, 73 F and 70 percent humidity, then practice should be altered to allow for light pads only. Finally, if temperature and humidity are both high (e.g. 98 F and relative humidity of 60 percent), then practice should occur only in T-shirt and shorts, for less time, and at a lower intensity.

In fact, when those numbers are in the weather forecast, the smarter coach changes practice time to earlier in the morning and/or after the sun has set.

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