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## More Soccer Teams Adopting Headgear to Protect From Impact Injuries

By **Glen Rosales**  
*For the Journal*

For Santa Fe Prep girls soccer coach Rennae Ross, the idea of requiring her players to wear headgear was, well, a no-brainer.

"One of my girls collided with a girl from St. Michael's," Ross recalled. "They were both going up for a header and they knocked heads. They both had concussions. Our girl got the better of it, but she was still out two weeks. The other girl was hurt pretty bad. I had been thinking about getting the headgear before that and that night I ordered them and had them shipped overnight."

That was in 2003 and the Blue Griffins were likely the first high school soccer team in the state to require players to wear the headgear. Since then, several other girls high school teams have donned the hard-leather, padded, cushioned band that wraps around the players' foreheads.

But on the ultra-competitive, youth club level here, headgear was slow to make inroads. At least until this season.

The Alameda Soccer Club's boys under-11 Avengers began wearing the headgear when practice began in August after the parents voted that it was a requirement to play on the team.

"No one else is doing it," said Lori Lange, whose 9-year-old son Benjamin is an Avenger. "The only way we could do it is if the whole team wore them."

Team coach Juan J. Morales said he was in favor of the idea if it can prevent concussions, especially as the team learns to head the ball.

"A couple of the parents came to me kind of concerned," he said. "It doesn't interfere with their play and if it's something that's going to protect them, then I'm all for it."

Once the decision was made, overcoming the stigma was the next hurdle.

Avengers parent Mark Bruge, an endocrinologist at University of New Mexico Hospital, said he had his doubts initially.

"I was a bit skeptical," he admitted. "I played soccer when I was young and we never had to wear headgear. You can actually see the brain changes (on X-

rays) if they take too many headers. This seems to lessen the likelihood of a concussion."

The empirical proof of that is still ongoing, but researchers are starting to show that the headgear might indeed have some benefits.

A 2003 study by four University of Pittsburgh professors concluded that the headgear did show "a significant reduction in peak force of impact," in regards to heading balls.

And there's plenty of anecdotal testimony to show that the headgear can have benefits.

University of New Mexico women's coach Kit Vela has told several of her players with a history of concussions to wear the devices.

"I would get them for the whole team if I could," she said. "I think they really do help, especially for training. When we're doing a drill that requires them to head ball after ball, I wish we could have them use the headgear."

The Lobos don't outfit the whole team because the program can't afford it and a request for the nearly \$1,200 from the general athletic fund was turned down.

Head gear manufacturer Full 90 is a sponsor of the New Mexico Youth Soccer Association and its Web site includes a link to the company.

"We certainly advocate the use of headgear when the parents are excited about it," said Jim Tilley, NMYSA executive director.

The organization, however, has no plans to mandate the use of head gear in its member leagues.

Ross, who is also an emergency medical technician, sees the headgear as a way to lessen the severity of hard head contacts with other players, goal posts and the ground.

"The reason I have the team wear them is for impact injuries," she said. "Head to head. Head to ground. I had two girls hit their heads on the ground and the physicians attending them said their injuries would have been much worse if they weren't wearing the headgear."

A 2005 study published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine seems to back up Ross.

"Header (head to ball) responses with or without headgear were not significantly different," said the study conducted by researchers from Biokinetics and Associates Ltd. in Ontario, Canada, and the FIFA Medical Assessment and Research Center in Zurich, Switzerland.

"In head-to-head impact tests the headgear provided an overall 33-percent reduction in impact response," the study concluded.

The U.S. Soccer Federation in 2005, however, came out with a statement from its Sports Medicine Committee saying that "no evidence that wearing this sort of headgear is beneficial to players and is concerned that it might actually

lead to more injuries."

What's more, its member leagues can not mandate the use of headgear because it is not included in the FIFA's Laws of the Games list of mandatory equipment.

Nevertheless, the Avengers will continue their use of the helmets.

"I don't even think about it," said 10-year-old Cole Burge. "They said it's for the injuries. It doesn't bother me. I can't even feel it."