

Protect Players, Volunteers

A close-up photograph of a person wearing a grey uniform, likely an umpire or catcher, holding a black baseball catcher's helmet. The person's hands are visible, gripping the helmet. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a baseball field.

Death of batter, head injuries to catchers, umpires underscore need to ensure safety of helmets for those closest around the plate.

Are you adequately protecting your batters, catchers and umpires?

Head injuries are an area of critical importance for any league due to their severity of risk. One of the positions most at risk for head injuries is the batter, because of the proximity to both pitched, hit and foul balls. But the catcher and umpire are both similarly close and have the same risks and needs. The death of actress Natasha Richardson from a skiing fall has raised awareness around the world of head injuries.

Does your safety plan address head safety, from equipment to prevent injuries to education on what steps to take if an injury occurs?

Baseball Death Underscores Need

The death of high school batter Patrick Clegg, a Waynesville, Mo., High School baseball player, who was hit by a pitch while batting also serves as a cautionary tale. Clegg, 16, was batting in a game on April 21. The pitch was reportedly high and inside, causing Clegg to turn his back to it and duck his head. However, the pitch didn't hit his helmet, but his neck, just at the base of his skull under his helmet.

The story, reported in the *Springfield, Mo., News-Leader*, indicated he was struck in the brain stem and immediately collapsed on the field. Two days later, he was declared brain dead and taken off life support.

Batting Helmets Must Fit

Part of your plan should be efforts of prevention, making sure batters, catchers and umpires have proper protection. Since many players and volunteers use community equipment designed as one-size-

with Proper Equipment

fits-all, make sure it does fit everyone, or that different models are available.

Injuries happen when helmets fall off while the player is running the bases, too. Make sure chin straps are on all helmets that have the snaps or latches to hold the strap in place. Smaller players are at risk of poorly fitting helmets falling off, leaving their heads unprotected. Little League requires each team to have six NOCSAE-approved helmets available for each team's batters. Make sure a variety of sizes are available, to meet the need of varying sized players' heads.

Are your league's helmets inspected and maintained properly? Another concern for helmets is the need for replacement after a hard hit.

Manufacturers state that once a baseball batting helmet has been hit hard once, it should be discarded. Don't wait for a crack to show that the shell is compromised, as a break could happen *before* an obvious crack appears.

Helmets cost between \$15 and \$40, depending on style and manufacturer. Don't put players at risk over whether a helmet has served its use.

Umpires Need Quality Masks, Helmets, Too

In separate instances within a week of each other, two MLB umpires were sidelined with head injuries after being hit by a broken bat and a foul ball while behind the plate.

On April 19, home plate umpire Ed Hickox was tagged in the center of his facemask with a foul tip. Hickox worked the rest of the game but spent the night in the hospital under observation. He was expected to be out of action for a week with the resulting concussion.

In a more severe injury, MLB umpire Kerwin Danley was removed from the field on a stretcher after the

top of a broken bat hit him in the helmet during a game April 24. Danley also suffered a concussion, but because he wore a full hockey-style mask and helmet, it was speculated that equipment saved him from a worse injury.

Does your league provide umpires with quality masks and helmets? Make sure these volunteers are well protected, too.

Don't Modify Helmets with Paint, Stickers

Finally, check all your helmets for unapproved paint or stickers. Helmet manufacturers have warned Little League for several years that any modification, either of stickers or paint, not approved by the helmet manufacturer will void the warranty.

That should tell your league the manufacturer, who knows its product best, is concerned that these helmets will fail with no warning if they've been modified, and the manufacturer won't be held responsible. Applying paint or stickers to the shell can cause a chemical reaction that destroys the helmet's hard, protective ability. Helmets may not be repainted or stickers applied unless approved in writing by the manufacturer. See rule 1.16 and 1.17 for specifics on this.

Don't allow league helmets, including personal player helmets, to be used if they have been painted or stickers have been put on them, for the players' safety.

Make Sure Players Wear Helmets When Required

One concern for any league should be that its players and volunteers follow proper procedures for wearing helmets.

Here are some reminders on helmet use, for both practices and games:

Catcher's helmet and "dangling" throat guard

- Warming up a pitcher
- Catching during infield/outfield warm-ups
- Playing position of catcher during games or practices (with chest protector, shin guards, and cup for males)
- **NOTE:** Skull caps not permitted

Batting helmet (facemask optional)

- Batting practice (anywhere on field or in batting cage)
- Batting in games
- Running bases
- Pitching practice (standing in batter's box while pitchers throw to catcher)
- Players coaching first or third bases in coaches' boxes
- *Optional:* Adults coaching first or third bases in coaches' boxes