

Concussions in Speed Skating – What You NEED to Know!

By Susan Ellis

Concussions are happening more and more in the sport of short track speed skating and even in long track. As the speeds have increased so had the risk of concussion, despite improvements in board padding and helmets. In short track, many concussions are sustained from the head striking the padded boards, or from the whiplash effect of hitting the boards. In long track, many concussions are a result of skaters falling into other skaters, either while racing, or falling into skaters in the resting lane. One long track skater I know was out for a year after sustaining a skull fracture when another athlete fell and took his feet out from under him. This same athlete then had to fight with his national governing body to be able to wear a helmet in long track competitions. (Helmets should be mandatory for long track in my opinion, but, ya, right, it doesn't look cool. But hey, that's what short trackers used to say back in the day too, and now they are mandatory).



As one who had lived with severe post-concussion syndrome for 12 years, I am well aware of the consequences of concussion, yet I am still amazed at how flippantly skaters, coaches, and parents brush off concussions and allow athletes to return to activity before they are ready. The scary thing is that most people do so because they are not fully aware of the dangers of concussions, or think that just a few days rest is all that's needed to be as good as gold again.

Many sports such as football and hockey are making great strides in education for coaches, athletes, and parents on concussions. Even in US Speedskating, concussion education is now a requirement at all coaching levels. But maybe because people think those 'really bad' concussions only occur in contact sports, speed skaters still tend to brush them off too easily.

So rather than go into a comprehensive article myself on concussions, the best thing you can do to educate yourself, your family, your coaches, your skaters, about concussions is to take the free [Heads Up: Concussion in Youth Sports](https://www.cdc.gov/headsup/youthsports/training/index.html) (<https://www.cdc.gov/headsup/youthsports/training/index.html>) online course available to coaches, parents, and others helping to keep athletes safe from concussion. It features interviews with leading experts, dynamic graphics and interactive exercises, and compelling storytelling to help you recognize a concussion and know how to respond if you think that your athlete might have a concussion.

Once you complete the training and quiz, you can print out a certificate, making it easy to show your league or school you are ready for the season.

This course will help you:

- Understand a concussion and the potential consequences of this injury,
- Recognize concussion signs and symptoms and how to respond,
- Learn about steps for returning to activity (play and school) after a concussion, and
- Focus on prevention and preparedness to help keep athletes safe season-to-season.

If you aren't motivated right now to take this course and learn more about how you could potentially save yours or someone else's life, read these stories and you just might be!

[Zack's story](#)

(https://www.cdc.gov/headsup/pdfs/stories/a_fathers_story-a.pdf)

[Tracy's story](#)

(<https://www.cdc.gov/headsup/pdfs/stories/TracyStory.pdf>)

[Alexandria's story](#)

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7u48A0FnX80&feature=player_embedded#t=124s)

Sue's story:

I had just arrived a few weeks earlier in Colorado Springs to take a new job as head coach of the US team. I was driving to a training session and needed to make a left turn. I put on my signal and looked in the rear view mirror. No worries, there was a car coming up behind me but he was a long way away. I waited for an opening in traffic coming from the opposite direction so I could make my turn. All the while I checked my mirror and the car behind was getting closer, but still no worries as he was still a ways back. Oncoming traffic was heavy and there was no opening yet, so I checked the mirror again and was terrified to see the car was now very close with no sign of slowing down and the driver looked to be looking elsewhere. There was nothing I could do. Bam! He hit me full tilt. That was my first concussion – a result of the whiplash jolting my head forward. No worries, I was back at the rink the next day, just a little fuzzy, but not down and out.

Two weeks later the team was in Lake Placid for a camp. I thought I was well enough to ride a bike. Thought I would take just a little test to the end of the driveway and back so I could go on the ride with the team. Got to the end of the driveway and a dog ran out in front of me. I slammed on the brakes, flew over the handlebars and smacked down on the pavement. I remember the impact on my body but I don't remember hitting my head although a lady who saw it said I did. Major concussion! It would be days before I could watch even a small part of the track to watch the team. I could sit at the end of the rink in the stands and watch part of the straightaway but not the corner. It would be months before I could watch an entire lap of skating from the side of the rink without wanting to throw up. Back in Colorado Springs I had to line the side of the bed against the wall with pillows at night because I was so dizzy I would feel like I was falling out of bed and

would slam into the wall trying to catch myself. Noise hurt, music hurt, bouncing balls hurt, lights hurt.

Eventually, after months, I was able to put my skates on and coach from the end of the rink.

Then one day a skater was finishing an interval, had his head down, and slammed into me. Concussion # 3. You see, the problem is once you've had one concussion, it is easier to get more, and the more you get the worse it is.

I could bore you with details of concussions # 4 through umpteen but I'll suffice it with a summary of the impact these repeated concussions have had on my life:

I was an avid white water kayaker. I wasn't very good in class 5 water but could handle class 4 and loved the thrill of it. After a period of a couple of years without concussions I thought I would try it again. I hired a kayak instructor to come with me and supervise my first foray back. I was pleased to find I could still do a roll in flat water so we ventured in to Class 2 water. No problem, so we ventured in to Class 3. The movement of the water bothered me and I dumped, and then found I couldn't roll back up and stay up because I was too dizzy. After a while under my head grazed a rock and that was the end of my kayaking. I came home and sold both my white water kayaks and my husband's white water canoe.

I used to race bikes and still loved cycling. However the motion of the bike and the traffic around me proved too much for my head. I sold my racing bikes.

My husband and I love to hike. I remember doing one hike where there is just a narrow ledge and a chain to hold onto to get across the mountain. It was thrilling! Now we completely avoid any kind of risky hikes as I never know when my head is going to go for a spin.

My husband and I love to travel. We have a small trailer tow for camping. Now instead of me kicking back and looking at the scenery while he drives, I have to do all the driving as I get too dizzy and nauseated being a passenger.

And probably the worst thing of all – I can no longer skate. It's too dangerous as I am dizzy almost 100% of the time. I stopped even taking my skates to the rink after a major concussion 3 years ago.

I am sensitive to even small noises, lights, movement around me, and the more I am fatigued the worse it gets. When my head is having a good day I feel almost normal, but most days are not like that and I feel like I am constantly wearing a band around my head and on really bad days have trouble intaking information and formulating thoughts.

I have developed many coping strategies over the years to avoid or minimize things that impact my head, such as looking away from motion, keeping the house very quiet,

asking people to keep track of what I am saying at camps so that if my mind blanks they remind me of what I was saying and I pick up where I left off.

Life with post-concussion syndrome is no fun. I have been to doctors, and doctors, and doctors. And in July I have yet another doctor at the Brain Sciences Unit at Sunnybrook hospital in Toronto. Even if I could enjoy simple canoe trips, hikes, and easy bike riding again, I would be happy, but after 12 years, I'm not holding out for a miracle cure. Three years ago it was also discovered I have what's called a semicircular canal dehiscence. Basically it's the ear canal that sits under the brain and it was broken, presumably under the force of one of the whiplash type concussions, but we don't know which one. Surgery may be an option down the road to repair that part of my post-concussion syndrome but any time you have to cut a hole in the skull and move the brain it carries risks, and even if they say they can do it I will have a big decision if I want to take the risk.

I share this information with you, not for you to feel sorry for me, but to make you aware of the risks of not only one concussion, but of repeated concussions. Life, as I knew it will never be the same for me.

A FACT SHEET FOR PARENTS

WHAT IS A CONCUSSION?

A concussion is a type of traumatic brain injury. Concussions are caused by a bump or blow to the head. Even a "ding," "getting your bell rung," or what seems to be a mild bump or blow to the head can be serious.

You can't see a concussion. Signs and symptoms of concussion can show up right after the injury or may not appear or be noticed until days or weeks after the injury. If your child reports any symptoms of concussion, or if you notice the symptoms yourself, seek medical attention right away.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF A CONCUSSION?

Signs Observed by Parents or Guardians

If your child has experienced a bump or blow to the head during a game or practice, look for any of the following signs and symptoms of a concussion:

- Appears dazed or stunned
- Is confused about assignment or position
- Forgets an instruction
- Is unsure of game, score, or opponent
- Moves clumsily
- Answers questions slowly
- Loses consciousness (even briefly)
- Shows mood, behavior, or personality changes

Symptoms Reported by Athlete

- Headache or "pressure" in head

- Nausea or vomiting
- Balance problems or dizziness
- Double or blurry vision
- Sensitivity to light
- Sensitivity to noise
- Feeling sluggish, hazy, foggy, or groggy
- Concentration or memory problems
- Confusion
- Just “not feeling right” or “feeling down”

HOW CAN YOU HELP YOUR CHILD PREVENT A CONCUSSION OR OTHER SERIOUS BRAIN INJURY?

- Ensure that they follow their coach’s rules for safety and the rules of the sport.
- Encourage them to practice good sportsmanship at all times.
- Make sure they wear the right protective equipment for their activity. Protective equipment should fit properly and be well maintained.
- Wearing a helmet is a must to reduce the risk of a serious brain injury or skull fracture. However, helmets are not designed to prevent concussions. There is no “concussion-proof” helmet. So, even with a helmet, it is important for kids and teens to avoid hits to the head.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU THINK YOUR CHILD HAS A CONCUSSION?

SEEK MEDICAL ATTENTION RIGHT AWAY. A health care professional will be able to decide how serious the concussion is and when it is safe for your child to return to regular activities, including sports.

KEEP YOUR CHILD OUT OF PLAY. Concussions take time to heal. Don’t let your child return to play the day of the injury and until a health care professional says it’s OK. Children who return to play too soon—while the brain is still healing—risk a greater chance of having a repeat concussion. Repeat or later concussions can be very serious. They can cause permanent brain damage, affecting your child for a lifetime.

TELL YOUR CHILD’S COACH ABOUT ANY PREVIOUS CONCUSSION. Coaches should know if your child had a previous concussion. Your child’s coach may not know about a concussion your child received in another sport or activity unless you tell the coach.