

Two-thirds of severe sports injuries to female students due to cheerleading

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A new report on severe sporting injuries among high school and college athletes shows cheerleading appears to account for a larger proportion of all such injuries than previously thought.

The latest annual report from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill-based National Center for Catastrophic Sports Injury Research shows high school cheerleading accounted for 65.1 percent of all catastrophic sports injuries among high school females over the past 25 years.

Previously, the figure was believed to be 55 percent, but new data included in this year's survey indicates that the true number of cheerleading injuries appears to be higher.

The story is the same for college participants as well. At that level, the new data shows cheerleading accounted for 66.7 percent of all female sports catastrophic injuries, compared to past estimates of 59.4 percent.

The difference is due to a new partnership between the UNC center and the National Cheer Safety Foundation, a California-based not-for-profit body created to promote safety in the sport and collect data on injuries, which provided the center with previously unreported data. The addition of new information compiled by the foundation saw the inclusion of an additional 30 injury records from high schoolers and college students. Beforehand, the number of direct catastrophic injuries in all sports totaled 112.

The center's director, Frederick O. Mueller, Ph.D., professor of exercise and sports science in UNC's College of Arts and Sciences, who has authored the report since it was first published in 1982, said catastrophic injuries to female athletes have increased over the years.

"A major factor in this increase has been the change in cheerleading activity, which now involves gymnastic-type stunts," Mueller said. "If these cheerleading activities are not taught by a competent coach and keep increasing in difficulty, catastrophic injuries will continue to be a part of cheerleading."

Between 1982 and 2007, there were 103 fatal, disabling or serious injuries recorded among female high school athletes, with the vast majority (67) occurring in cheerleading. No other sports registered double-figure tallies; gymnastics (9) and track (7) had the 2nd and 3rd highest totals, respectively.

Among college athletes, there have been 39 such injuries: 26 in cheerleading, followed by three in field hockey and two each in lacrosse and gymnastics.

In 2007, two catastrophic injuries to female high school cheerleaders were reported, down from 10 in the previous season, and the lowest number since 2001. However, there were three catastrophic injuries to college-level participants, up from one in 2006.

Mueller said catastrophic sporting injuries may never be totally eliminated, but collecting and constantly analyzing reliable injury data can help reduce them dramatically.

According to the report, almost 95,200 female students take part in high school cheerleading annually, along with about 2,150 males. College participation numbers are hard to find since cheerleading is not an

NCAA sport. The report also notes that according to the NCAA Insurance program, 25 percent of money spent on student athlete injuries in 2005 resulted from cheerleading.

Source: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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