

November 4, 2013

No Heroism in Playing After a Head Injury

By SAM BORDEN

Manchester City once had a goalkeeper named Bert Trautmann. Trautmann, a German, spent his professional career in England and was known for his uncanny ability to save penalty kicks. His most famous moment, though, came when he helped City win the F.A. Cup at Wembley Stadium despite playing the final part of the game with a broken neck.

That is not a misprint. With 15 minutes remaining that day, Trautmann was involved in a collision with an opposing striker. He lost consciousness as a result of the clash yet stayed in the game, made a few more saves to preserve the victory and was lionized by soccer fans everywhere for his “bravery.” It was only days later that he learned he had dislocated five vertebrae and risked further injury, perhaps even death, by continuing.

That was in 1956. One would think a half-century of advancement in medical awareness would have changed things considerably, and yet here we are today, hearing about another goalkeeper who lost consciousness on the field, who has been declared, in some circles, heroic, for demanding to play on anyway.

The issue, like most involving global soccer, has many layers, including a clear cultural gap in how players, executives and fans feel about head injuries in Britain compared with their counterparts in, say, the United States. At its root, though, is this seemingly basic question: How was a player who had been knocked out — to the point that he admitted not even remembering what had happened — allowed to talk his way into staying in the game?

This time, the goalkeeper was a Frenchman, Hugo Lloris, who plays for Tottenham Hotspur. On Sunday, with about 12 minutes remaining in a match with Everton, Lloris slid to collect a bouncing ball near the side of his penalty area and was struck in the head by the knee of Everton striker Romelu Lukaku.

The impact was significant: Lukaku waved immediately for medical assistance with Lloris sprawled on the ground, unconscious, as the ball rolled away. Lloris was attended to by trainers and a team doctor on the field. After several minutes, it appeared he would be replaced. The team’s captain, defender Michael Dawson, appeared to encourage Lloris to leave the field for further treatment. A stretcher was prepared. Brad Friedel, the reserve goalkeeper, took off his warm-up suit and stood by the sideline, waiting for the substitution to be processed.

Then, as Lloris was being helped toward the bench, he began to struggle with those assisting him. He wanted to stay in the game. This went on for a few moments, and Tottenham’s manager, André Villas-Boas, ultimately directed Lloris to return to his net, and waved for Friedel to step away from the sideline. Lloris finished the game — Lukaku, it

should be noted, did not, needing ice on his knee because the collision with Lloris's head was so painful — and the match ended in a 0-0 tie.

Afterward, predictably, controversy sprouted quickly. Villas-Boas said the choice to keep Lloris in was his and revealed to Sky Sports that “Hugo still doesn't remember the impact, but he was quite focused and quite determined to continue.” Martin Tyler, the longtime British soccer announcer, referred to Lloris as heroic in his commentary at the final whistle, and many fans took to social media to praise Lloris, their sentiments running contrary to a different group of observers, many of whom cited the N.F.L.'s head injury concerns in expressing disbelief about the way the situation was handled.

By Monday morning the debate had mushroomed even more. Wayne Diesel, Tottenham's chief medical officer, said in a statement that “once the relevant tests and assessments were carried out” on Lloris, the club was “totally satisfied that he was fit to continue playing.”

That sentiment appeared to contradict the actions of the medical team on the field, though, and a number of observers were critical of Tottenham's actions.

Jiri Dvorak, FIFA's chief medical officer, said flatly that Lloris should have been taken out.

“The fact the other player needed ice on his knee means it's obvious the blow was extensive,” Dvorak said. “It's a 99 percent probability that losing consciousness in such an event will result in concussion.”

Strong statements were also issued by [the Professional Footballers Association](#) and [FIFPro](#), the global soccer players' union, which criticized the decision to allow a player who lost consciousness to continue playing.

So, what happens next? Very little immediately, it seems, though the weakness of the Premier League's policy regarding head injuries has been highlighted by this incident. The policy's language deals only with what happens if a player is substituted because of a head injury (in those instances, he must not play for at least five days).

Because Lloris did not leave the game, he technically did not sustain a head injury, despite all evidence to the contrary.

That reality, as well as the sheer [number of incidents](#) this season — including one in which Lukaku, the player who collided with Lloris, [did not remember scoring](#) the winning goal — will lead the panel of team doctors in the Premier League to address the issue of head injuries at its next in-season meeting, a person familiar with the group's plans said. The larger concern, though, may need to be addressed at a higher level.

Some of the steps the N.F.L. has taken include a lengthy concussion examination for injured players that is administered away from the field and takes roughly 15 minutes, as well as the presence of a doctor, not associated with either team, who is on site to make determinations on a player's health.

Calls for those sorts of changes may need to come from FIFA, and they could involve a shift in how substitutions are handled. A team is allowed only three substitutions, and a player who has been substituted cannot return to the game. Given the risks involved with head injuries, FIFA could consider allowing for a temporary substitution in the case of a suspected head injury, so coaches and doctors would not feel pressured to make a decision on a player because of the situation in a game.

Of course, the biggest step is taking away the decision completely. Regardless of the substitution rules, requiring an independent doctor to examine players who sustain head injuries is a shift that soccer should look to copy from the N.F.L. However concerned Villas-Boas, or any other coach, might be about a player's health, there is always the lingering obligation to the rest of the team and the game.

Villas-Boas, though seemingly smart and sharp as a soccer coach, is not a doctor. His determination that Lloris could keep playing because he "showed great character and personality" is disingenuous and dangerous.

If it seems mind-boggling, that's because it is. Bert Trautmann played with a broken neck. Hugo Lloris played with, at minimum, a foggy memory. Both were hailed as heroes. Both deserved far better.