



During the last couple of years there has been discussion on the impact of heading the ball in soccer. It is somewhat curious that after 137 years of the modern game that the question arises just now. Did those who played the game before us know so little? Were they so unconcerned with their own well-being and that of others that they ignore these alleged dangers?

Over the last ten years there have been few studies conducted on the physical and mental impacts of heading. Nothing is conclusive at this time. Consider this from the U.S. Soccer Sports Medicine Committee:

“At Present, there are many gaps and inconsistencies within the medical literature regarding the safety of heading in soccer. The impact of purposeful heading is linear which is less severe than rotational impact. ...Head injuries during soccer are more likely to be from accidental contacts such as head-ground, head-opponent, or the rare head-goalpost. At this point in time, it is premature to conclude that purposeful heading of a modern soccer ball is a dangerous activity.”

So most head injuries in soccer are from the head impacting something other than the ball. The human skull is surprisingly tough. Head injuries from the ball occur when the technique is done incorrectly.

Here lies the real problem. Many coaches teach heading incorrectly or not at all. So many players head the ball wrong and this could cause injuries or inaccurate or poorly paced headers.

Heading the ball is a difficult skill to learn. When should players start? Introduce heading in the U-10 age group. Teach heading to score and to clear in the U-12 age group both standing and jumping. Teach heading to pass, backwards heading (flicks) and diving headers in the U-14 age group. These age group recommendations are the average, middle of the bell-curve so to speak. A few players may start some of these techniques earlier, especially if they have older siblings playing. Others will start latter, as their confidence grows.

Players who can make exact passes with the head, who can save dangerous situations at their own goal by heading the ball away and who can make use of chances at the opponent's goal by means of lightning quick headers are indispensable to their team. The ball can be headed from a standing position, on the run or by jumping up to the ball with one or both legs; the ball can be headed forwards, i.e.; in the direction the player is facing, to the side and even behind. Early experiences can be painful if careful progression in building up confidence is not applied. When introducing the technique of heading the ball for the first time I suggest you start with a Nerf type soccer ball or an underinflated volleyball. Gradually work your way up to a fully inflated soccer ball. Begin with juggling with the head so that the player controls the pace, height, frequency of repetition,

movement, etc. Next go to head juggling with a partner. A good group game for heading is Toss-Head-Catch. In this practice activity the ball is being served from the hands, so the force is less than a crossed ball and is more accurate. The increased accuracy will allow for more repetitions of correct headers. The whole body is used to head the ball. The movement begins with the legs, the movement of the stomach muscles throws the trunk and upper body forward and the head, from the neck upwards, follows through quickly. The position of the forehead to the ball determines its flight path. Here are the key coaching points for the basic header:



Head: chin tucked in, neck stiff, never close the eyes. It is important to watch the flight of the ball until the moment of impact.

Upper body: brought back early into the curved position – and then snapped forward. Contact is made with the ball when the body is perpendicular to the ground.

Legs: bent at the knees to support the forward thrust.

Area of contact: middle of the forehead, sometimes the side of the forehead, never the temples or the top of the head.

Among young players there is a physical barrier to overcome when talking about heading and that is simply fear. The earliest and most elementary lesson about heading is never let the ball hit you. Go out and meet

it, and make contact with the front part of the forehead where the bone is the thickest. You must attack the ball! You hit it, not the other way around. The main surface of contact is of course the forehead. The ball must be struck, not cushioned. The neck and back muscles should be rigid to generate power. The part played by the eyes is important! Although it is likely that the reflex blinking action causes the eyes to be closed at the moment when the ball is struck by the forehead, players should be encouraged to watch the ball right onto the forehead. Only by doing so can a player time the actual heading movement accurately. There need be no fear of danger to the eyes since they are well protected by the heavy bone structure immediately above them.

There is no better feeling in soccer than beating an opponent in the air to plant a header in the net. Once you have done it, there is a hunger to do it again. It is a spectacular way of scoring goals, or come to that of stopping them. Defensively it is a great thrill in consistently clearing the ball in the air, beating opposing forwards, and establishing control.

The young player who fails to add heading to his or her armory of skills will never go far in the game.

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Although, at its best, soccer is
played mainly on the ground, the
technique of heading is vital.

