



## Keeping Your Head in the Game!

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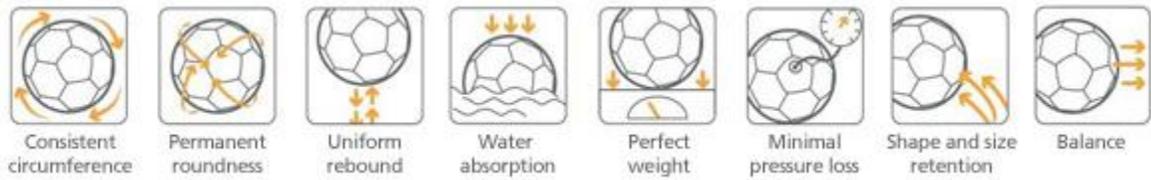
November 2015 is a time that will go down in the history books of major soccer -- The U.S. Soccer Federation (USSF) made a bold move in effort to reduce injury in youth soccer. The USSF banned heading, the act of using the head to redirect the soccer ball, for athletes 10 years and younger and limited heading to only practice settings for the 11-13 year-old players. Heading is a task that requires excellent neck and trunk motor control and strength; children under the age of 10 may not have the coordination or muscle development to correctly initiate head contact with the ball. Additionally, young children sometimes fear the ball as it approaches their head, and are unable to implement proper technique.

While these new heading recommendations from the USSF may help reduce risk to the brain, neck and spine, heading only accounts for a small portion of why concussions occur in soccer. Collision, rather than purposeful heading, has been found in recent studies to be the most likely cause for acute head injuries in soccer. Head-to-head, head-to-body part, and head-to-ground collisions in soccer account for most concussions.

How can you help your young athletes avoid head injuries in soccer?

- 1) Proper training: Encourage age-appropriate athletes to learn proper technique. Engage in an active neck and trunk strengthening program. When learning to head the ball or refining heading skill set, practices should be done with a beach ball or foam ball. No athlete should be forced to head the ball; if they are fearful, they are at increased risk of incorrect heading technique.
- 2) Observe the Rules: Educate athletes to discourage elbow/arm use during heading duels.
- 3) Safety enforcement: Check the area of play. Are there any hazards along the sidelines? Is padding securely attached to goal posts?

- 4) Use Proper Equipment: The ball should be the age-appropriate size, water-resistant, and inflated properly.



- 5) When in Doubt, Sit Out! Awareness of the signs and symptoms of concussion, and knowledge on concussion management and return to play protocols are important to prevent serious injury. If there is any suspicion that a concussion may have occurred, athletes should stop play and not return to play until evaluated by a physician experienced in concussion evaluation and treatment. Efforts to ensure that young athletes feel comfortable notifying someone when they are hurt keeps our young kids healthy.
- 6) Drills to develop neck strength and skills using beach or light-weight dry foam balls can be done to teach form without exposure to recurrent head trauma. Developing these skills is essential to appropriate implementation later.