

TO: All Area Fire and EMS Agencies, EMT-Instructors, Training Directors, ER Physicians

FROM: Becky Anhold, EMT-ST, EMT-Instructor, Certified Athletic Trainer  
Bridgewater Volunteer Rescue Squad

RE: Pre-hospital Care of the Spine Injured Athlete

DATE: September 9, 2003

I hope everyone had an enjoyable and relaxing summer. As the weather turns cooler, the area stadiums will be filled with the cheers of fans as our area youth participate in football games and practices.

Several concerns have been brought to the attention of the EMS Council in the past several months regarding the appropriate procedures for handling an athlete (specifically a fully equipped football player) with a potential spine injury. The concerns have come from area certified athletic trainers whom, in their professional training in sports medicine and athletic injury care, are working under the guidelines of the National Athletic Trainer's Association (NATA). Several incidents have occurred in which there has been some confusion either in the field or in the E.D. setting as to whether equipment should have been removed prior to immobilization. These concerns were brought forth to the MCRC Committee on Monday, September 8, 2003, and their recommendation is to follow the current standards set forth by the NATA and the Inter-Association Task Force mentioned below.

The Inter-Association Task Force for the Appropriate Care of the Spine Injured Athlete as well as current EMT texts recommend leaving the helmet and shoulder pads in place unless one of several conditions exist such as: difficulty in assessing or managing airway even with the face mask removed, the helmet and chin strap do not hold the head securely, difficulty in properly immobilizing, or if the face mask cannot be removed after a reasonable amount of time. In my 16 years as an EMS provider and ATC, one of the most debated topics has been whether to leave equipment on or take it off before immobilizing an athlete. It was not until 1998, when the NATA developed this task force that definitive standard procedures were established.

Providers should review the Inter-Association Task Force for the Appropriate Care of the Spine Injured Athlete document, learn the recommended skills, and practice these skills to become proficient in their use. The document can be downloaded on the Council's website at [www.csems.vaems.org/downloads](http://www.csems.vaems.org/downloads). Agencies are encouraged to work cooperatively with their local college and/or high school certified athletic trainers to develop training and on-scene procedures for dealing with athletic injuries before they occur. Should you have further questions, please feel free to contact me. (540) 350-2057 (home), (540) 245-5050 (work), (540) 574-8587 (digital pager), or via e-mail at [banhold@msn.com](mailto:banhold@msn.com).

For more information on this and related sports injury topics, you are encouraged to review the following resources:

- September 2003 Virginia Office of EMS EMSAT Program on Athletic Injuries (to air Wed., Sept. 17, 2003)
- Spine Injury Management (CD-ROM and video package) from Human Kinetics Publishing available at [www.humankinetics.com](http://www.humankinetics.com)
- "Pre-Hospital Care of the Spine Injured Athlete" a document from the Inter-Association Task Force for the Appropriate Care of the Spine Injured Athlete. Available from National Athletic Trainer's Association website at [www.nata.org](http://www.nata.org)