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**Photo: Alex Houck, MS, ATC, PES, SES**

**IS YOUR STUDENT ATHLETE PLAYING IT SAFE? SPORTS CLINIC OFFERS TIPS**

**GREENSBURG, PA, July 26, 2010** ... Parents are naturally concerned about the health and safety of their children and that's especially true when their kids are athletes. While athletics is a great outlet, there is risk for injury. The National Athletic Trainers Association reports that with nearly 7 million high school students participating in sports today, 715,000 high school sports-related injuries are experienced each year, and 8,000 children are treated in emergency rooms each day for sports-related injuries.

"Sports injuries are a concern at any age, but kids playing increasingly competitive sports in school are especially at risk," said Alex Houck, MS, ATC, PES, SES. Houck is an athletic trainer from Excelsa Health's Orthopedics and Sports Medicine program working at Westmoreland County Community College (WCCC) with athletes playing in 11 different sports.

Educating parents, student athletes and even coaches about ways to help student athletes avoid common sports-related injuries is a top priority. To get everyone on the same team, Excelsa Health Sports Medicine is hosting its second "Get in the Game Sports Clinic", Saturday, August 7 from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at Westmoreland County Community College, Science Hall in Youngwood. The cost is \$5 per individual and \$10 per team or family member. The clinic focuses on signs and symptoms of a concussion, rehabilitation, strength training and more. Former Pittsburgh Steelers running back Rocky Bleier will be on hand and the first 75 to register receive a signed photograph at the clinic.

“This is a great opportunity for parents, coaches and athletes to be in the same room hearing the same message,” explained Houck.

Today, nearly all four-year colleges have athletic trainers and the popularity for trainers is increasing yet only about 42 percent of America’s high schools have access to athletic trainers. Excelsa Health has trainers at Yough, Jeannette, Penn Trafford and Burrell high schools as well as Seton Hill University, Saint Vincent College and WCCC.

“Athletic training at the high school level is probably the most beneficial especially for those moving on to higher levels of play. At this level, kids are more open to learning and understanding their bodies and how to prevent and rehabilitate an injury. This is extremely beneficial because it prevents all athletes a great deal of pain and lost playing time and prepares those moving on to an advanced level of play. They begin to understand what to expect from athletic injuries and know how to play safely,” notes Houck.

WCCC is one of just a few two-year colleges in its conferences - National Junior College Athletic Association Region 20 and the Western Pennsylvania Collegiate Conference - to employ a full time athletic trainer.

“The college has had a full-time athletic trainer for only the last three years,” said Dick Holler, who is the coordinator of Student Life and Athletics. “We’ve noticed a significant difference in our ability to prevent injuries and get athletes healthier and back on the field. The coaches love it and really appreciate having Alex’s professional expertise to monitor and evaluate and work with our athletes so they can safely be the best they can be. You just can’t put a price tag on the value of it.”

While athletic programs are being evaluated at many schools, WCCC is actively growing its Varsity athletic program. Three years ago, the school offered five programs and by fall 2011 the total will be 13 by adding men’s and women’s cross country men’s and women’s soccer.

“Alex came onboard a year ago when we entered into a partnership with Excelsa’s Sports Medicine program. Her expertise along with the resources of Excelsa will be more important than ever before as we offer more athletics to our students,” said Holler.

In addition to athletic trainers, Excela Health's Sports Medicine program offers much more to parents and athletes who don't have access to an athletic trainer, those who play recreation sports and to adults who are considered weekend warriors with access to physician assistants, board certified orthopedic specialists specializing in sports medicine and a primary care/sports medicine physician, who administers a Concussion program designed to protect athletes from complications of head or brain injury. The Concussion Program utilizes the "Immediate Post-concussion Assessment and Cognitive Testing" (ImPACT), which provides computerized neurocognitive assessment, tools to assist in determining an athlete's fitness to return to play after suffering a concussion. Prevention (recognizing signs and symptoms) is also a focus and is conducted through patient education, speaking engagements and clinics.

"Many people aren't aware of the full scope of what an athletic trainer does," shared Houck. "I always start out by telling them if they are watching a professional football game and an athlete gets injured, the first person onto the field to begin the assessment of the athlete is the athletic trainer."

Athletic trainers play a significant role in the management, prevention, recognition and rehabilitation of injured athletes. Under the supervision of a licensed physician, athletic trainers administer immediate emergency and follow-up care. They develop athletic injury prevention and treatment programs using their knowledge of biomechanics, anatomy and physiology.

A critical part of an athletic trainer's job is providing a vital communication link between the injured athlete, the physician, the coach, and the athlete's family, to determine when it's right to return to practice and competition.

"In short, our goal is to help athletes prevent injuries. When they do, we evaluate the situation, refer them to a doctor if necessary, treat acute and chronic injuries and work with the athlete through rehabilitation, so they can get back to play as quickly yet safely as possible."

So what if your child's school does not have access to an athletic trainer? There are plenty of resources available. Here's a list of things to consider:

1. Make sure your child has a physical examination.

2. Ask who will provide care if your child gets injured and ask to review their credentials.
3. Provide coaches with your child's medical history.
4. Young athletes need proper nutrition for optimal body function and proper hydration prevents the risk of heat illness.
5. Know your coaches' qualifications. Do they have knowledge in the sport? Are they credentialed if required? Do they have cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), automated external defibrillator (AED) and first aid training?
6. Does the coach strictly enforce the sports rules and have a plan for dealing with emergencies.

Houck offers the following advice to all athletes: "Don't ignore your body; the smallest problems can become bigger quickly, which could cost you practice and playing time. Don't hide things from your coach or athletic trainer; they are there to help you perform your best. Finally, head injuries are no joke. Don't ever hide a head injury or symptoms – it could mean serious injury or death."

For more information about the Sports Medicine program, call Excelsa Health Orthopedics and Sports Medicine, 724-689-1970. To register for the "Get in the Game Sports Clinic, visit [excelsahealth.org](http://excelsahealth.org), or call toll free 1-877-771-1234.