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Group to Phase Out Old Football Helmets

By ALAN SCHWARZ
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Football helmets more than 10 years old are worn by about 100,000 young players every fall, presenting what manufacturers and experts in the field have long considered an inappropriate safety risk, particularly in the current age of growing concerns about concussions.

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Conradt Family

An old helmet may have led to Max Conradt's paralysis.

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But the use of outdated head protection will soon become far less common. The trade group that oversees the refurbishing of used helmets, the National Athletic Equipment Reconditioners Association (Naera), announced on Thursday that it would no longer accept helmets more than 10 years old.

The national governing bodies of high school and youth football, covering about 4.4 million players ages 6 to 18, require only that helmets emerge from the factory passing the standard set by the National Operating Committee on Standards for Athletic Equipment (Nocsae). So, helmets of any age and condition can be worn, despite concerns over how the stiffening of foam and the degrading of the polycarbonate shell can leave a player more susceptible to concussions.

Schools and youth organizations often send their helmets to be reconditioned, which involves the cleaning and replacement of worn parts, but this remains a voluntary process. Naera's decision to reject helmets more than 10 years old will force organizations to choose between purchasing new helmets or putting youngsters in used helmets known to be less safe.

This could so discourage their use that old helmets will become virtually extinct, experts in the matter said this week.

"There has been a growing concern that we make some

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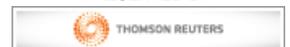
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sort of a policy to make coaches and parents do what we think is correct,” said Ed Fisher, Naera’s executive director. “As a current coach and former administrator, I

would want my son, and anybody’s son, to be in a helmet less than 10 years old. We need to get the older ones off the field.”

Naera’s 10-year rule follows Nocsae’s announcement in January that it will pursue several new safety-related measures, including the development of a test standard that considers the complex forces that cause concussions. Nocsae, a volunteer consortium of mostly doctors and sporting goods officials, said it also would pursue a separate test standard for youth and high school helmets.

Those efforts began soon after the Consumer Products Safety Commission began a formal investigation into football helmet safety. Senator [Tom Udall](#), Democrat of New Mexico, requested that the Federal Trade Commission investigate helmet makers, specifically the industry leaders Riddell and Schutt, for potentially false and misleading advertising regarding the safety properties of their headgear. F.T.C. officials have not confirmed any investigation, citing commission policy.

On Tuesday, Representatives [Henry A. Waxman](#), Democrat of California, and G. K. Butterfield, Democrat of Michigan, requested that the House Subcommittee on Commerce, Manufacturing and Trade hold a hearing regarding football helmet safety, citing among other matters the use of old helmets. Such a hearing could hasten the development of further safety-related measures under consideration, like warning labels on helmets that would explain their limited safety properties with respect to concussions.

“I view this as a step forward in the much larger and necessary process of ensuring that all helmets — both new and used — are providing as much safety as possible” said Inez Tenenbaum, the safety commission’s chairwoman. “I believe it is equally important that all responsible parties take all appropriate steps to ensure helmet purchasers and users understand clearly what a helmet has been shown or not shown to protect against. This is especially the case when it comes to concussions.”

Because many schools have paid for their helmets to be reconditioned for use this fall, Naera’s new rule will go into effect next off-season, Fisher, its executive director, said.

Experts have long discouraged the use of helmets more than 10 years old, but the National Federation of State High School Associations has always left the decision to schools and manufacturers, said Bob Colgate, the organization’s assistant director.

He said the group had not discussed adopting any rule regarding a mandatory helmet lifespan at its recent rules meeting.

Asked why, given recent concern about helmet safety, Colgate said: “I don’t know. We haven’t had that discussion yet.”

One possible downside of Naera’s 10-year rule is that underfinanced schools and youth organizations that might have reconditioned their old helmets — at a cost of about \$30 apiece — could balk at the idea of spending \$150 to \$200 for each new helmet and choose to use the old ones for another year. Fisher said that he believed the resulting legal liability would discourage that, and that most organizations would buy new helmets.

“School budgets are being whacked, but schools haven’t bought new helmets because they haven’t had to,” said Bob Fawley, the owner of Capitol Varsity Sports, which reconditions helmets in Oxford, Ohio. “Now they have to, basically. I don’t think it will hit that hard at the high school level. Youth football is where you see the numbers — there are a lot of older helmets there.”

The Naera rule was welcomed by Joy Conradt, whose stepson, Max, was permanently



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disabled in 2001 by concussions he sustained playing Oregon high school football in a 20-year-old reconditioned helmet. The Conrardt family sued the school district, its insurance carrier and the reconditioning company and settled out of court for \$3.2 million in damages toward Max's lifelong medical care.

"This is an enormous step toward taking very, very seriously the safety of our young players who are perhaps the most fragile," Joy Conrardt said. "And it forces school systems and staff to look very carefully at the necessary financial costs of contact sports — as well as those ethical costs and costs to health and life that so many young players, and even older players, have realized in these last years."

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