New York high school football player killed during military-style practice drill

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A 16-year-old New York high school football player was killed last week while participating in a group exercise designed for US Navy SEALs.

Joshua Mileto, a Sachem East High School junior, died Thursday from injuries when a log carried by him and his teammates apparently slipped and struck the teenager. A group of boys were hoisting the log, which weighed approximately 400 pounds, above their heads when it fell and crushed Mileto.

The "team building" drill was carried out at a special camp organized by the Sachem East Football Touchdown Club and was advertised as means of preparing the teenagers for the upcoming Fall high school football season.

Bob O'Malley, president of the New York State Athletic Trainers Association, was quick to question the drill's use. "I've never seen that drill in an athletic setting," O'Malley told *Newsday*.

Sports safety expert Douglas Casa, executive director of the University of Connecticut's Korey Stringer Institute, had issues with teenagers performing an exercise developed for Navy SEALs. "There's so much potential for things to go wrong that I would really want people to think twice before doing something like that," Casa told the Associated Press.

A former player described the log as about 12 feet (3.7 meters) long and the diameter of a utility pole. "It's very big. It's like a tree, and it's a challenge for people who weightlift," he told reporters.

Mileto, who played the position of defensive back and wide receiver, was remembered by Valerie Malfa, a fellow Sachem East student interviewed by the *New York Times*, as a "sweet person" and a "really talented" football player.

The dangers confronting high school football players are many.

As part of the preparation for the fall playing season, teenage players are made to practice for hours outdoors in the summer months, the hottest time of the year. Coaches frequently push players to the point of physical exhaustion and withhold water from players for long intervals.

From 1995 to 2015, 61 football players died from heat stroke in the United States—46 were high school students, according to the National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury Research. Ninety percent of recorded heat stroke deaths occurred during practice.

One of the most recent deaths was Florida youth Zachary Polsenberg at Riverdale High School near Miami. Polsenberg, also only 16 years old, died in July after collapsing during an offseason football workout in late June.

The youth, 6-foot 5-inches tall and 320 pounds, was taken off life support later. It was reported that his core body temperature had been as high as 107 degrees for more than an hour.

Polsenberg dreamed of a professional career, according to reports.

When high school coaches look to the military for drills, they often overlook the official limitations the Department of Defense puts on drill instructors and trainers. In short, high school football coaches can do to teenagers what a Marine drill instructor would face criminal penalties and courts-martial for doing.

The Department of Defense (DOD) requires that all routine, strenuous physical activity stop when the heat index—the measure of humidity, air temperature and wind—reaches 90 degrees. Called a "Black Flag" day, it is mandatory and applies to the US Army, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard as well as the Marines.

In Tennessee and a number of other states the heat limit before any safeguards are taken for high school athletes is 104 degrees. A search of the Florida High School Athletic Association (FHSAA) web site revealed no temperature

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or heat index limits, only recommendations, like Tennessee, far less restrictive than what the military demands.

At the same time, American workers face the most brutal summer working conditions and little or no protection. The US Department of Occupational Safety and Health Administration's OSHA) "suggested" limit goes up to 115 degrees but no requirement that outdoor work cease.

If this were not enough, recent studies have revealed that football players are at high risk of suffering a specific form of brain damage known as chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) due to the repeated head trauma which comes with contact sports.

A recent study found that 99 percent of deceased professional players examined suffered from CTE, while more than 20 percent of the high school players examined had the disease. Symptoms of CTE vary but include confusion, memory loss, depression, impaired judgment, anxiety, anger issues, aggression, difficulty controlling impulses, and suicidal tendencies.

In general, American professional sports are profoundly distorted and dangerously warped by the drive for billions of dollars in annual revenue, placing the often astoundingly talented player's physical and psychological well-being directly in harm's way for profit. Those qualities in the highest levels of professional sports trickle down to amateur and high school sports.

It is not surprising that high school coaches and school officials countenance military-style drills in hopes of developing winning teams. High school sports, especially football, have become big business in the United States.

For many years now American high school football has been a money-maker for schools, often the only sport to make money or the sport that makes the most for them. As school budgets were cut, especially after the 2008 economic crisis, football was increasingly seen as a way to minimize the financial impact.

"It's an economic juggernaut," Mark Conrad, associate professor of legal and ethical studies at Fordham University's school of business, told CNBC in a 2012 report on high school football as a business.

Some examples give a sense of the immense amounts of money being spent just at the high school level:

• A $62.5 million, 18,000-seat high school football stadium was opened in Allen, Texas in 2012. This was recently topped by McKinney, Texas, a suburb of Dallas, which approved a $62.8 million stadium in 2016.

• Shoe company New Balance paid $500,000 in 2012 toward refurbishing an existing high school football stadium in Gloucester, Massachusetts. In exchange, New Balance secured the stadium's naming rights. There were similar deals with local businesses: Lakewood, Ohio for $320,000 and Noblesville, Indiana for $575,000, according to the report.

• The New York City public schools contracted with cable television in 2012 to broadcast high school athletic events for two years, receiving $500,000.

• The California Interscholastic Federation signed a 15-year deal worth $8.5 million with Time Warner Cable to televise high school football playoff games.

"The money in sports is looking for the next generation and high school sports are huge economically. It's natural in a way that big money is going in that direction," Robert Boland, academic chair of the NYU Tisch Center for Hospitality, Tourism and Sports Management, reported. "In a school district, the schools will likely be competing among themselves for money. Some schools will have higher-paid coaches and better sport programs and they can keep getting money while leaving others behind."

Pressure on students to perform well on the field means a better day at the bank. Athletes can be encouraged to play despite injuries, there can be more recruitment violations by coaches and "special treatment to schools—at the expense of others—that are deemed winners by districts."

Winning coaches are paid more and high school success for coaches and students alike can be a stepping stone to colleges where football revenue dwarf high school revenue and the coaches of nationally ranked teams are placed on pedestals and paid seven-figure salaries. Many poor and working-class youth dream of college careers that are followed by a draft by the National Football League.

"These are just kids really and so vulnerable in many ways," Boland admitted. "These high school sports have been monetized and it's not always in [their] best interests."

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