

Statement of Alexis Ball

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Hearing on “Concussions and the Marketing of Sports Equipment”

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Chairman Rockefeller, Ranking Member Hutchison, and Members of the Committee, I want to thank you for inviting me here today. My name is Alexis Ball, and I am a senior at the University of New Mexico. Concussions have greatly altered my life. I appreciate the opportunity to take an advocacy role in concussion awareness.

I have played soccer since I was four and have always been a high achieving student athlete. Throughout my career, I earned numerous academic and athletic awards. In high school, I was New Mexico Gatorade Player of the Year and our valedictorian. By my junior year in college, I was an Academic All American, captain of my team, and had received First Team All Conference honors. My coaches often spoke of my potential to lead our team to a place that it has never been. However, for as many awards as I have accumulated, I have accrued about as many concussions. I sustained approximately five concussions prior to college and five concussions throughout college while wearing “protective” headgear. In fact, it was a concussion that terminated my collegiate career a year early.

I was medically disqualified from playing collegiate athletics in December 2009. This decision came after a season of struggle following two concussions I sustained in the beginning of the season. During pre-season, I was offered the opportunity to shadow an ER doctor. I excitedly took the opportunity because I want to be a doctor. A man came in with a knee

laceration that I was not prepared to see, and I fainted and hit my head. It was clear I had a concussion due to the dizziness, vomiting, and seizures that followed.

My coaches were not so pleased when I called them the following morning informing them of the concussion. I had already sustained three concussions at UNM, and no one wanted me to add any more to the list. In accordance with the team doctor's requirements, I sat out for a week. However, my rest time still forced me to be watching practices in the blistering hot temperatures of August in New Mexico. I met with the sports medicine doctor a week after the concussion in order to be cleared to play. The doctor asked me the normal concussion questions, such as "do you have a headache right now?" Or "can you remember these three words?" I had heard these questions all too many times before. I was still experiencing headaches and bouts of dizziness at this time, but it was the week of our first game and my coaches wanted me to play. Thus, I supplied the necessary answers to get cleared.

I played for about two weeks without many issues. I did not play well, but I was there. In about our third game, I took a header off the top of my head (an area of my head which was not covered by my head gear). I was not able to stand up and needed assistance to leave the field. I had sustained another concussion. I sat out for a week again and then returned to play.

However, the weeks following this concussion were horrible. Not only had I lost my starting position, but I seemed incapable of getting it back. I was playing terribly and simply was not myself. Many other things had changed as well. I no longer was able to sleep at night. I would fall asleep around 3 o'clock in the morning after lying restlessly in my bed since 10 o'clock at night. I could not pay attention in any of my classes. However, the most disturbing change was the twist in my personality. I no longer enjoyed partaking in anything. I would go home and sit in my room and stare into space, not comfortable in my own body. I did not know

who I was anymore. I would either go to practice and feel void of all emotion or begin crying uncontrollably randomly in the middle of it. I was lost. My teammates initially asked if I was ok, and I would shrug my shoulders, replying weakly, “yeah I’m fine.”

As the weeks progressed and my playing continued to deteriorate, I felt my teammates distancing themselves from me. About two months into the season, I had a meeting with my fellow captains. They informed me that they had lost respect for me and felt that I was selfish by acting so introverted at practices. I was in disarray, and these comments only worsened my fragile emotional state. Only my best friend and my parents remained by my side. I didn’t know who to be anymore. I thought that Alexis, the high achieving student athlete, was permanently gone.

My mom was seriously concerned about my well-being. She e-mailed a doctor that she knew with her concerns and urged me to consult with him. I was very resistant to this idea because I felt that not sleeping and having some gloomy days were such silly reasons to see the doctor. I finally went and talked to him. I told him all about my struggles, and he was rather concerned. In an effort to see what was happening, I took a neuropsychology test. The test revealed that my visual memory was impacted. I now fell in the 20th percentile of all people for visual recall. My doctor informed me that I was experiencing prolonged symptoms from the combination of the two concussions I sustained months prior. I was shocked.

My doctor and I talked about the status of my future in soccer. We discussed the numerous concussions I have had throughout my soccer career. I had accumulated 10 concussions in about 8 years. We also talked about the implications for my future if I were to sustain another one. The doctor concluded that for the safety of my future, I should hang up my

cleats. It was a crushing blow, yet one that needed to be done. Ultimately I had to separate my head from my heart.

Concussions are a very serious insult to your brain. People frequently claim an athlete *just* sustained a concussion, like it is no big deal. Too often coaches, athletes, and parents dismiss the severity of concussions because it is not a visible injury. If an athlete tears their ACL or sprains their ankle, it is apparent externally that they are injured. This is not the case with concussions. A doctor or coach often cannot see the physical manifestations of a concussion. Moreover, many of the symptoms of post-concussion syndrome are not easily associated with the initial blow. I had no idea that my insomnia or the sadness I had felt could be correlated to an injury that I had sustained months prior. That is one message that I want to emphasize today. Athletes who have had concussions must be aware that symptoms can last longer than a few days or weeks. They can last for months and in some cases for life.

Another issue athletes need to be aware of is the limited efficacy of head gear or helmets. I wore protective head gear since my second concussion in high school per the recommendation of my trainer. It was supposed to be a preventative measure against concussions. Clearly this gear did not prevent me from sustaining further concussions. It is essential for coaches and athletes to know that athletes are not free from concussions because they have protective head gear.

Furthermore, I believe it is also important to note that the mentality to return to play as quickly as possible is very prevalent in the world of high school and collegiate athletics. There is a lot of pressure on athletes to just deal with their injuries or they will be in jeopardy of losing their starting position or playing time. This cultures an environment in which it is really easy to lie about your symptoms, especially when it comes to concussions. I knew the test questions and

the answers needed to return to play. No one could prove whether I had a headache or not, so I was apt to lie. In retrospect, this was a very poor decision, but I did not understand the severity of concussions at the time. I also believe that most coaches and athletes do not truly understand the long term ramifications of concussions. I continued to play much longer than I probably should have due to the high number of concussions I had throughout my entire career. I most certainly returned to play too quickly. People only have one brain for life. It is not something that can be repaired via surgery like most other injuries. I will never regain the visual memory I once had. I also will not be able to regain the respect I lost while I struggled through my final season of soccer.

Concussions adversely impacted my life. I hope from my story you have learned that concussions and brain injury are not a minor injury. In order to prevent more stories like mine, concussion awareness needs to be more prevalent among coaches and athletes in our society. People need to understand that wearing protective gear does not stop concussions from occurring. Therefore, I want to thank you again for inviting me here today in a step to further public education about this invisible injury.