



Montclair High School trainer faced tough questions in football player's 2008 death

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As Ryne Dougherty took his defensive stance on the north end of the Montclair High School football field on Sept. 18, 2008, he knew he had one job to do. Knock the ball carrier down.

For the junior linebacker, a borderline varsity player standing 5 feet 10 inches tall and weighing 180 pounds, practice was the one place where Ryne could show his coaches he didn't belong on the junior varsity team anymore.



Ryne Dougherty, 16, collapsed during a 2008 game against Don Bosco Prep and died two days later.

It was the sort of drill that football coaches have used since the game was invented to gauge their players' toughness. The live blocking and tackling drill.

Fifteen minutes in, Ryne joined in on the tackle of a varsity player. But as the scrum broke up and players returned to their positions, Ryne was still on his back, complaining that his head hurt and that he didn't want to get up just yet.

"I am dizzy and I have a headache," Ryne told the school's athletic trainer when she rushed from a nearby soccer field to find him facedown on the turf.

Minutes later, Ryne was vomiting.

Twenty-five days later, Ryne would be back on the field, facing off against Don Bosco Prep — one of the powerhouses in New Jersey high school football — in a junior varsity game that would be his last.

Two weeks ago, the Montclair Board of Education agreed to pay Ryne's family \$2.8 million to settle a 2009 negligence lawsuit alleging the school's decision to let their son back on the field led to the 16-year-old's death.

Pre-trial depositions obtained by The Star-Ledger offer the first glimpse at the case Montclair school officials

were facing as they tried to defend the actions of their athletic staff.

Taken some two years after Ryne died, the depositions provide the most detailed account to date of the head injury Ryne suffered in practice less than a month before the Don Bosco game.

And they offer fresh insight into the thinking of the school's trainers and coaches in the weeks before Ryne played his last game as a Mountie.

Most vulnerable

Experts hired by Ryne's family attribute his death to Second Impact Syndrome, an affliction that leaves its victims vulnerable to even the most minor blow to the head because the brain has yet to heal from its first injury.

Victims are almost always adolescents. Half of them will die.

Had the lawsuit gone to trial, Robert Cantu, a renowned Boston neurosurgeon and adviser to the NFL Players Association, was prepared to testify that Ryne was suffering from the syndrome and shouldn't have been on the field.

"Ryne Dougherty was prematurely allowed to participate in football as he was not fully symptom free and still in the recovery phase," Cantu wrote in a September 2011 report.

Montclair head coach Ed Lebida, in his 36th year coaching football, immediately sensed trouble when he spotted Ryne on the ground during that 2008 practice.

He told his assistants to move the other players away. One was sent to the soccer field to get head trainer Michele Chemidlin.

She found Ryne facedown.

"I got him to sit up," Chemidlin said during a May 2011 deposition. "We were talking. His eyes were a little glassy. He was dizzy, nauseous."

Chemidlin called Ryne's stepfather, William "Bucky" Schnarr, on her cell phone and told him to get to the field quickly. Ryne vomited while he was sitting on the golf cart.

Doctors said he'd had a concussion, his second since a helmet-to-helmet hit a year before — on Sept. 4, 2007.

Ryne was determined to play in the Don Bosco game. It was the sort of game where a good showing could raise his standing among the coaches.

For weeks, he'd been begging his mother, Marinalva Schnarr, to let him return to football.

She still remembers him pleading: "Come on, Mom!"

When she finally relented and agreed to let him play again, he embraced her, she recalled.

"I didn't want him to play football," Marinalva Schnarr said in an interview Friday. "I always wanted him to be a doctor or a scientist. I didn't know anything about football."

To her, football meant soccer, the game played in her native Brazil.

For the Schnarrs, the decision to let their son back on the field was an anguished one. Ryne was doing well in school, getting A's and B's on his report cards. And he loved playing football.

"There might be some bumps and bruises, but football was good for Ryne," said Bucky Schnarr. "There were a lot of life lessons. There were so many good things that happened. You don't want to take that away from kids."

The Schnarrs said they assumed doctors and school officials wouldn't let Ryne back on the field if he wasn't ready.

Before he headed off to the Don Bosco game, Ryne told his stepdad, "Today is my game. I'm gonna be a star."

In the first quarter, Ryne was knocked on his back trying to make a tackle. On the ground, writhing in pain, he grabbed his head. Dazed, he was helped to his feet. He collapsed on the way to the sidelines and soon fell into a coma.

Two days later, on Oct. 15, 2008, Ryne Dougherty — the kid nicknamed Ryno, who dreamed of one day playing football in college — was taken off life support and died in a Hackensack hospital room. His brain was no longer functioning.

Lebida, for one, said that while he was well aware of how serious concussions could be, back in 2008, he had never heard of the Second Impact Syndrome. He relied on Chemidlin to let him know whether Ryne was ready for contact, the coach testified.

Chemidlin's conduct would be singled out for stinging criticism by Robb Rehberg, past president of the Athletic Trainers Society of New Jersey, an expert hired by the family's lawyers.

"Chemidlin's laissez-faire attitude toward Ryne's return to participation in football flies in the face of sound professional judgment one would expect from a reasonable athletic trainer and ultimately allowed Ryne to participate in the game that led to his death," Rehberg wrote in an October 2011 report.

Edward Thornton, the attorney who defended the case for the Montclair schools, declined to comment.

Mark Tabakin, a lawyer for the Montclair schools, also declined to comment on the depositions. And he said neither Lebida, who has since retired, nor Chemidlin would be available to comment. Neither responded to repeated requests to be interviewed.

Answers unchecked

"Fogginess," Ryne checked off on Oct. 2, 2008, in response to a question about whether he was experiencing any post-concussion symptoms.

Ryne and some 15 other teammates were in a high school classroom taking the ImPact test, which gauges an athlete's baseline brain function so that if an injury does occur, doctors will have data to compare it to. Symbols or numbers pop up on a screen and the athletes are supposed to check off what they see.

Beth Baldinger of the Roseland law firm Mazie Slater Katz and Freeman, who represented Ryne's family, said the teen scored abnormally low.

But Chemidlin testified that she didn't immediately check the results of that test and was unaware of Ryne's answer. She said she considered the test invalid because another player wouldn't stop talking during the exam.

"One of the kids was being unruly," Chemidlin said during the May 2011 deposition. She kicked him out of the room.

Chemidlin did not look at Ryne's test score until after the lawsuit was filed, she testified.

Contact sports

However, the next day Ryne still reported feeling tired and sluggish, but he attributed it to staying up late studying. His family doctor agreed he could wait a few days and return to contact sports on Oct. 6.

Once he returned, Chemidlin was supposed to monitor Ryne for a five-day, return-to-play period, gauging his ability to handle increasing levels of exertion before she allowed him back on the field.

But she only saw him on three of those days, she testified. On two others, he didn't show up, she said. Ryne was anxious to play in the Bosco game.

"It is well known, if an athlete is asked how they feel they will usually say fine, wanting to return to play," Cantu, the Boston neurosurgeon, wrote.

But Cantu said Chemidlin had a responsibility to determine if Ryne was experiencing any of 25 post-concussion symptoms.

And then, on Oct. 10, Chemidlin said she saw Ryne suited up for the varsity game against Don Bosco. She had not yet formally cleared him to play and assumed that the coaches knew he was still working his way

back into action.

"Spoke with Ryne briefly on the sideline of the varsity game," she wrote in her notes. "He was pumped for the game. Feeling good and excited."

But she didn't prevent him from taking the field three days later on a Monday afternoon, Chemidlin said.

She said her decision was influenced by the fact his own doctor had cleared him. The Montclair schools and Ryne's family sued the teen's family physician, Michelle Nitti. Both lawsuits were dismissed by a judge, Baldinger said.

"I did not feel he was at risk for what he went through," Chemidlin told Baldinger during the end of a daylong deposition as the questioning grew heated. "Because I felt that he went through our return-to-play (period) and I felt that he was cleared by his doctor."

At several points during the hours of questioning, Chemidlin asked to leave the room to compose herself, Baldinger said.

"Tell me, on what basis did you believe that Ryne was 100 percent symptom free and should be allowed to play?" Baldinger demanded as the schools' lawyer, Edward Thornton, chided her for raising her voice.

"Because I believed him," Chemidlin said.

"You believed a 16-year-old?" Baldinger asked.

"Yes, I did, because if he was going to come to me earlier with littler things, then why wouldn't I think he would be honest with me in a situation like this," Chemidlin said.

'Someone will be saved'

Marinalva Schnarr said she hopes that some good might come from her son's death. She believes schools should follow their rules and make sure athletes have gone through a rigorous battery of tests before they're allowed back on the field. And parents should be drawn into the decision-making process, she said.

"I think there was a reason for my son's death," she said. "I'm hoping my son's death is going to save other kids. I know I lost my baby, but someone will be saved because of his death."

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