

Heading for Trouble: The Case for banning Heading in Junior Soccer



At the AFS Shepparton Cup, U16s players battle for possession – in the moment, nothing else matters

In 2014, millions around the world watched in awe as Robin van Persie launched himself into World Cup History with his famous torpedo-style headed goal, an equaliser that thrilled millions and changed the game.

I was ten, soccer-mad and glued to the screen watching the Netherlands vs Spain live with my Dutch father at an ungodly hour of the morning. When Van Persie's header hit the net, I jumped off the couch like I'd done it myself. It was everything I loved about the game – skill, timing, athleticism, courage. But now, a decade on, that same move feels different. Research into brain injury has shifted the conversation. What once looked like magic now carries a warning: at what cost?

Today, on the back of the Matildas' success at the Women's World Cup hosted in our very own backyard, which saw record-breaking numbers in almost every metric; from viewership to revenue, Australian Football (also known as soccer) is booming.

With a surge in participation in the sport comes fresh pressure on Football Australia to adapt 'heading' rules to protect its players.

Australia's Matildas team suffered [four concussions](#) in the World Cup tournament alone, with another just before the tournament. This real, human toll was quickly swept away in the razzmatazz of the Matildas' unprecedented campaign.

The overwhelming majority of such injuries are caused by “heading” the ball, and yet heading remains, unfortunately for the injured players, a captivating element of the game that Australians have grown to love. The sight of a player jostling for position through a thicket of defenders and leaping skywards before the victor sculpts the trajectory of the ball with the precise calibration of the head and ‘nods’ it home is enthralling.

But is the fleeting prestige a header grants worth a potential lifetime of cognitive dysfunction?

Beyond the battle for a header, however, is a dark irony. By “winning” a header, a player forfeits their brain to potential irreversible damage and the “loser” of the duel is ironically fortunate enough to escape impact. The better a player is in the air, the more brain trauma they expose themselves to.

To make matters worse, all too often, on the most sickening of occasions, players clash heads when competing in the air. Beyond the brain trauma players can inflict on one another when competing for a header, is the compounding effect of sub-concussive impact caused by a successful header. The evidence is overwhelming; [heading the ball and brain trauma are undeniably and irrefutably linked](#).

To the everyday person, this is common sense, but heading is unfortunately not only an adored aspect of our game, but a blinding one.

The issue is as much about the culture of the game as it is about an administrative one. Concussions are still too brushed off or spoken about with an element of irreverence, perhaps no better demonstrated than during the recent Womens’ World Cup , when a Dutch player was allowed to return to the field after a head clash, following ‘state-of-the-art treatment’, of course.

The treatment in question? [A swimming cap](#) to stem the bleeding from the head!

In the soccer world, the true lifelong impact of heading is subjugated knowledge. Therefore, an appropriate ban on heading, even for younger players, has potential to enhance levels of awareness concerning its associated risks and Australia’s soccer community would reap the benefits as a whole.

Adapting rules and the culture of heading must be introduced at a grassroots level; with Australian Football’s most valued resource: junior soccer players. It is now common

knowledge that young human brains continue to develop well the early 20's. What is unknown, however, are the potential risks of heading on the developing brain.

Restrictions on heading for the youth guarantee that Australia's younger players have not only the physical aptitude to perform headers, but the mental proficiency to understand the risks involved with doing so. There is no tangible detriment if heading were introduced later in life, say around the age of 14 or 16. Rather than doing away with a basic ability, it's crucial to teach it at the right time and continue to monitor the safety of the young athletes involved.

Banning headers in training, mandating protective headgear, awareness campaigns and encouraging young players to keep the ball on the ground through developmental programs are just a few initiatives Football Australia should consider.

There is no excuse not to.

A change to heading rules and culture is even more crucial for the female game. Female footballers are experiencing [heading-induced brain trauma five times more than male players](#), according to research by The Albert Einstein College of Medicine.

Appropriate steps have already been made elsewhere to ensure player safety.

For instance, the US soccer federation has implemented a ["Road to Recover" program](#), emphasising the importance for player safety and proposing rule changes to mitigate the likelihood of concussion and brain trauma in the process.

So, what's the delay for Football Australia?

Fortunately, the need for heading is already subsiding. A look at the trend of the Premier League goals scored with headers and aerial crosses indicates that the art of [heading is going out of fashion](#). Long gone, are the days of hoofing the ball into the box and hoping to "stick a head on it."

This decline of the "Target-man" style of playing should hopefully be paralleled in youth soccer, but it needs the necessary enforcement to ensure the safety of Australia's young athletes, as the game evolves further, progressing into a more technical, tactical and entertaining brand of football

While an outright ban on heading in top-flight football would be unforgivable for many fans, at the grassroots level, where players are most vulnerable, a ban on heading

seems almost inevitable. This is not a matter of banning one of the game's more exciting aspects but rather introducing it at the right time. The next generation of Australian footballers would no doubt be better off for it.

It's time for Australian soccer's governing body to implement this crucial shift and prioritise the welfare of the game's future players. We must take this step. It's a bold step, but an inevitable one.

In doing so, we uphold the very spirit of the beautiful game itself.