



Sizing-Up Helmets and Shoulder Pads

How to properly fit football helmets on your young players

By Billy Rice

As a coach or parent, ensuring the safety of your players while they are on the football field is your most important concern. That said, knowing how to properly fit your player with the right equipment makes your team that much safer.



And in today's environment, a coach must be proficient at more than organizing practices and teaching skills. You must be able to properly fit helmets and shoulder pads on your young players. Their safety and well-being depends on it. Let's take a look at how to go about preparing youngsters for a day of football fun.

Helmets

Proper fitting is the key to head protection and player comfort. The goal is a customized fit for every player. A helmet that doesn't fit can contribute to head injuries. The helmet should always move as the head moves, and should not move independently of the head.

1. Instruct players on the dangers of using the helmet incorrectly, and the importance of using proper blocking/tackling techniques.
2. Before fitting, note any irregularities of the head, which may require a fitting adjustment. Two players with the same sized heads may have two completely different-shaped heads.
3. Measure a player's head with helmet tape to determine proper shell size. Do this about 1 inch above the eyebrow. Wetting the player's head makes the initial fit easier.
4. Tighten the chinstrap so that the cup is snug and centered on the chin. Do not allow your players to play with unsnapped chinstraps. This can cause the helmet to pop off on contact.
5. Be sure the player's ear openings are centered with the helmet's ear openings.
6. Check to see that the eyebrows are 1 to 1 1/2 inches below the helmet's edge.
7. Make sure they jaw pads follow the contours of the cheek. It's very common for young players to have very narrow faces. You may have to adjust the thickness of the jaw pads to get a better fit.
8. Try to rotate the helmet side to side. Forehead skin or hair should move with the helmet, but it should not slip.
9. Check to see that the faceguard is 2 to 2 1/2 finger widths from the tip of the nose.
10. Check vision, both peripherally as well as up and down. He should be able to see peripherally to about 180 degrees and up and down to about 75 degrees.

The basic function of a shoulder pad is to protect the player's shoulder, back, and chest. You will encounter more of a variety of body types and shapes when fitting shoulder pads. Most youth pads are designed as all-purpose pads.



1. Determine the proper size pad. There are several ways to do this:
 - Shoulder width — Have the player extend his arms straight out to the side at shoulder level to form a "T." Measure from the indentation where the deltoid and trapezius muscles meet on one side to the same point on the other side.
 - Chest measurement — Using a tape measure, measure around the chest line of the athlete as he takes a normal breath and holds it.
 - Weight measurement — This is the most commonly used method with youth players. Figure out his weight and convert to a chest size.
2. Check to see that laces are centered, snug and tightly tied.
3. Make sure the straps underneath the shoulder pad are snug with all the slack taken out.
4. Check to see that the caps on the outside of the shoulder pad extend one-third to halfway down the arm.
5. Look to see that the shell padding extends three-fourths to 1 inch beyond the AC joint when the arms are at the athlete's side.
6. Check to see that the area formed by the union of the sternum and the arches cover the clavicle.
7. Check to see that there is a 2- to 3-inch space between the shell padding and the neck.
8. Look to see that the arches adequately cover the pectoral area.
9. Check to see that the athlete has adequate range of motion; he should be able to raise and lower his arms without the pad riding up into the neck opening.
10. Finally, have the athlete put his helmet and jersey on and assume his stance to make sure you haven't overlooked anything.

Billy Rice is the national promotion manager for Schutt Sports. He frequently speaks at clinics for athletic directors, football coaches, equipment managers and athletic trainers regarding equipment and safety. For more information, visit <http://www.schuttsports.com/>.

The evaluation of any athlete, whether as a part of health evaluations prior to activity or as a diagnosis of an injury as the consequence of sports activities, is specific to that individual and the history and current state of the individual presented. Advice, diagnosis and treatment is individualized according to numerous factors, including patient health and age information, medical history and symptoms. All athletes should be cleared by a physician or other appropriate medical professional before engaging in physical activities and, after injury, diagnosis and treatment, for return to play.