

Frank Seravalli: Goal of Bauer hockey helmets to reduce concussions

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OTTAWA - The road to a reduction in hockey's devastating concussions may well run through Saint-Jerome, Quebec, a small town 45 minutes northeast of Montreal. There, more than 100 researchers and designers at Bauer Hockey have spent the last 2 1/2 years dedicated to improving their helmets. On Friday in Ottawa, Claude Giroux helped represent Bauer's launch of the new Re-Akt helmet. For Giroux, the project hits home because he sat out four games last month with his second career concussion.

Giroux is among 72 NHL players to sit out with a concussion during the first half of the season. The Flyers account for nearly 9 percent of all cases with six such injuries, well above the average of 2.4 players per team.

In fact, James van Riemsdyk and Danny Briere returned to practice yesterday for the first time in nearly a week-and-a-half, as they continue to battle their chronic symptoms. Both players left the ice before participating in hitting drills. Chris Pronger is out for the rest of the season with concussion-like symptoms.

"It's been a pretty big problem," Giroux said. "Just on our team alone, we had six guys that have had concussions this year. It's good to see guys like Bauer try and prevent that. Any time I can try to prevent those kind of hits, it's good so that I don't have to think about [my equipment]."

Bauer president and CEO Kevin Davis was quick to point out that his revolutionary new technology, which "simply does not exist in any other ice-hockey product in the world," will never be able to fully prevent concussions.

"As you know, it is very difficult to get experts in any field to agree on anything," Davis said. "But the one thing medical experts do agree on is that one helmet will never prevent concussions. It's not a concussion-proof helmet, because there is no such thing as a concussion-proof helmet."

For years, the hockey equipment makers have been held to lame certification standards in the United States, Canada and Europe that require helmets to only reduce risk of localized injuries like lacerations, bruises and skull fractures. Bauer, which supplies helmets to 44 percent of NHL players, took it one step further.

Working with Dr. Mark Lovell, the retired founder of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center sports medicine concussion program, which diagnosed Pronger in November, the helmet combines the latest medical, biomechanical and materials research that sets a new bar for safety.

The biggest selling point is a "suspend-tech" liner, a system designed to protect the head from excessive rotational acceleration when the helmet is impacted.

In layman's terms, the free-floating liner moves independent of the inner foam to not only maximize comfort but prevent excessive movement during angular impacts, like on a blindside hit, which would theoretically cut down on the actual movement of the brain inside the skull. It also performed well in tests at both high and low impact.

"It's a lot better than the helmet I had before," said Giroux, who was the first NHL player to wear the helmet, and has worn it in the last four games. "A lock on the back makes the helmet the right size

for your head. And it doesn't move around when you get hit."

Most important, it looks good. Sadly, that's still a big selling point for players, who have in the past settled on looks instead of protection.

"Players do see if it looks good," Tampa Bay's Steven Stamkos said. "Guys are starting to change that. We're aware of long-term and short-term effects. Players can be pretty picky when it comes to changing gear, especially in the middle of the season. They can be superstitious when you have success with something.

"When you see teammates get concussions, it opens your eyes a little bit that maybe you should wear the equipment that is safer. It's probably the safest helmet in the game."

The Bauer Re-Akt helmet will be available for youth and adult players in local stores in May.

Stamkos, 21, said he started to take an interest in concussion research and technology when Sidney Crosby started missing time. The NHL and NHLPA met in Ottawa on Friday to speak about concussions, a meeting they hold at least three times per season.

"'Concerned' is a good word to use," the NHLPA's Mathieu Schneider told the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review, describing players' feelings. "When you see guys like Sidney with his struggles, obviously, but also Chris Pronger being shut down for the year. [For] a guy who is big, tough as they come, and had great awareness on the ice - that sends a message."

For Stamkos, the concussion argument comes back to the players' on-ice actions. No helmet will prevent a concussion, but the technology certainly can't hurt.

"League has done a great job in trying to prevent concussions," Stamkos said. "You're never going to not have concussions. I think we're just more aware of what happens now. Players do realize the risk that you take when you go on the ice. It comes down to player accountability. We can wear all the new equipment we want, but you have to be aware of situations on the ice and make smarter [decisions]."