

## Testimony for Congressman Pallone

My name is Niki Popyer and I am a senior at Marlboro High School. Thank you for the opportunity to represent the many student athletes in schools all over the country who have suffered concussions. I have been playing basketball since I was in kindergarten. I immediately fell in love with the sport and never passed up an opportunity to train and perfect my game. As a young child, playing sports gave me something positive to fill my free time, taught me how to be part of a team, develop lasting relationships based on a common goal, and rewarded me with the healthy self-esteem that succeeding at something brought.

As I got older, I strove to work as hard as possible in order to attain the personal goals I had set for myself. Not once did I choose something over basketball. I grew to be competitive, while still maintaining my humility. It was that competitive nature that drove me to play through the usual strains, sprains, broken bones, disappointments and achievements, and ultimately a string of concussions that robbed me of my passion and my dreams.

Today, I speak to you with a stunning seven basketball related concussions and another half dozen or so since I stopped playing. You see, at this point, it doesn't take much to knock me out. A mere tap to my head from an innocent hug for a picture has made me lose consciousness. The head injuries started in seventh grade when an opponent and I dove for a loose ball and my head hit the floor. That was followed by a slide into the wrestling mats, a broken nose after I was flipped over by a defender, and just a series of unlucky moves. In many instances, I was unconscious for several minutes and sometimes taken to the ER by ambulance. One especially malicious hit left me unable to see for the moments following the impact. Each time I sat out a little bit longer, but what my parents didn't know was that I was already having symptoms of post-concussion syndrome, but my only thought was to get back on that court. I didn't tell them that I had constant headaches, or that I couldn't stand bright lights or loud noises, that my hands tingled, or that I was becoming unable to concentrate in school.

Ironically, my parents were doing the right thing and taking me to many doctors, who either dismissed my injuries as just a bang on the head, or grossly misinformed us about the danger of repeated head injuries, or the potential of developing long lasting cognitive and neurological issues that could derail not only my basketball career, but affect my entire life.

We did as we were told. If they told me to sit out two days, I did. If they told me to stop playing until I was symptom free for the same duration as I had symptoms, I did. Unfortunately, none of them knew enough about concussions to treat me correctly. I was continually allowed to return to play, unaware that concussions were cumulative and not the stand-alone events they led us to believe they were.

That is why I am here. It's not enough to assume administrators, coaches, athletic directors, and health care professionals can arm themselves with the right information and tools needed to protect youth athletes from ending up in my predicament. There is a great need for a bill on concussions in school sports, like the Concussion Treatment and Care Tools Act. Without uniform guidelines and the money to

implement them, it will take schools longer to help students understand the importance of addressing a concussion and delay applying the protection they need. I have spent a great deal of the last two years working to increase awareness and I can promise you that not all doctors and coaches are capable of handling students with head injuries, and only a handful of those students are capable of making the decisions themselves.

Through the web, I have had the opportunity to talk to dozens and dozens of kids just like me, who either received the wrong diagnosis and treatment, or chose to hide their symptoms. I urge them to be honest and take enough time off to truly heal before returning to play. Even in my school, where I am a very visible example of going back too soon, my friends are still trying to cheat it. And I can tell you that all across the country, student head injuries are not being taken seriously enough.

I am very fortunate that my school has an excellent computerized neuro-cognitive testing program in place, and a certified athletic trainer and athletic director who advocate for and protect all the athletes. Unfortunately, that's not what I am hearing from other areas. Especially in these times of severe cut-backs in school programs, it is imperative that those schools who have the tools in place keep them, and those that do not are helped to get them.

I urge you to consider Congressman Bill Pascrell's legislation, the ConTACT Act, as another layer of protective gear for all the kids on fields and courts and gyms everywhere. Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to speak for those healthy aspiring youth athletes who we should help keep that way.