

# 'Put players' safety first,' former Ravens blueliner says

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**WATERLOO** — Former Waterloo Ravens blueliner Kylie Baldin has a message for all the coaches out there.

Still feeling the effects of the concussion she suffered two years ago in practice, one that effectively ended her hockey career, Baldin asks coaches to make player welfare their top priority.

"I think it's really important for coaches to put their players' safety first and not the game," Baldin, 18, said in an interview before she spoke at the Waterloo Ravens minor hockey concussion management workshop Wednesday night.

"That way, their players know the coaches are there for them. What really helped me recover was knowing that my coaches wanted me back but they cared more about my safety.

"I was lucky."

Rather than rush her back to the midget team's lineup, Baldin's coaches and trainer immediately recognized the severity of her injury and insisted she be evaluated by a doctor.

Just the same, Baldin's injury led to a long recovery, one that is not yet complete and without a timetable.

Concussions — or brain injuries — have been called "a



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Dr. Michael Czarnota, a neuropsychology consultant for the Canadian Hockey League, speaks Wednesday.

silent epidemic" because the wound is often invisible, said Robert Hennig, president of the Waterloo Girls Minor Hockey Association.

Hennig said the workshop's mission was to take the guesswork out of concussions for the 230 coaches, parents and trainers in attendance at RIM Park.

Often the symptoms — ranging from loss of consciousness, seizures, dizziness, amnesia and headaches, among more subtle warning signs — and treatments are different for everyone.

To make matters more confusing "study after study" has in-

dicated there is no relationship between the force of a hit and whether a player has suffered a concussion, the workshop's keynote speaker, Dr. Michael Czarnota, said.

"Sometimes coaches aren't very good at recognizing the symptoms. After all, we are just volunteers," said Czarnota, a Detroit-based neuropsychology consultant for the Canadian Hockey League.

"But if there are any concerns at all, it's just not worth the risk, he said. "We are not doing our players any favours (by rushing them back)."

Rushing concussed players back onto the ice could mean more medical problems and will likely slow the player's recovery, research indicates.

The Waterloo Ravens organized the workshop in part because research suggests female hockey players suffer concussions more frequently and those concussions are often more severe.

Some researchers have proposed men have stronger neck muscles to protect their brains from injury and others have suggested female hockey doesn't allow intentional body checking, therefore players don't learn how to absorb a hit.

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## Baldin still suffers from migraines

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Whatever the reasons, Czarnota advised coaches in all contact sports to prepare for possible concussions because they will likely happen sooner or later.

Ask yourselves "what am I going to do?" he said, adding having the player seen by a doctor is paramount.

Concussions are hockey's new hot-button topic because the game's premier player, Sidney Crosby, continues to recover from post-concussion syndrome.

Locally, the OHL's Kitchener Rangers have also made headlines with a recent spate of concussions suffered by their players.

Hockey at all levels has intro-

duced rule changes in an effort to eliminate contact to a player's head.

"It doesn't matter what level of hockey you are at, a brain injury is a brain injury. They all need to be taken seriously," Ontario Women's Hockey Association president Fran Rider said.

"We can't get caught up in the moment. If there's any doubt, sit (your player) out."

Baldin, whose concussion led to a burst ear drum and a bout of Bell's palsy due to brain swelling, said she is feeling better today.

Two years ago, she missed a month of her Grade 11 classes at Waterloo Collegiate due to persistent headaches and sensitivity to noise.

She still suffers from mi-

graines and a return to hockey was "too much" for her to handle, she said.

"Now, I'm ... better," she said with a pause. "I'm OK with it. It was hard at the time. My life was hockey before. But I came to terms with it.

"My coach and trainer told me hockey isn't everything."

Baldin can also console herself knowing things could have been much worse if she returned to hockey before her symptoms subsided.

She now spends her time attending classes at Conestoga College and volunteering at her church. For more information on concussions, visit [thinkfirst.ca](http://thinkfirst.ca).

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