



**“Lightening Safety in Sports”  
-Hollie Kozak, ATC**

With the warm weather comes the start of outdoor recreational sports. The rain and snow are replaced with thunder and lightening.

You are at your son’s baseball game and the wind begins to pick up and the sky becomes dark. Your son’s team has just made a come back and have runners on base.

You see lightening off in the distance. If they call the game now, they lose.

The storm is getting closer, but they keep playing. Comments like “it is just a little lightening” are heard from parents, athletes and coaches.

Does this sound like a familiar scenario? Often times the game is put before the athlete’s well-being.

In the fall and spring, the sports seasons are often scheduled with contests close together and do not allow days for “make-ups”. Because of this, games often continue to be played, even with the threat of bad weather.

The outdoor sports often have metal bleachers. The athletes are the “highest” points in the area. Baseball and softball athletes often have metal/aluminum backstops and bats. There usually is not “safe shelter” for the participants or their fans on or near the fields.

It is important for athletic directors, coaches, parents, officials and the athletes to be aware of bad weather and the threat of lightening. It is even more important to know what to do if you are trapped during a storm.

“Unfortunately nearly 100 people die from lightning strikes per year in the U.S. These fatalities are very preventable by using common sense and keeping an eye on the sky” states James Goff, DO, sports medicine physician for Summa Health System and team physician for Green High School.

Goff goes on to say “I always use the rule, “If you hear thunder, there is lightning” and that means weather conditions for lightning strikes are possible even if the storm is miles away. So if your outdoors, especially on a golf course, boating or just at the ball field, it’s best to seek safe shelter immediately after hearing that first rumble of thunder.”

The National Athletic Trainer’s Association has issued a position statement regarding “lightening safety for athletics and recreation”. Some of the highlights are as follows.

The first step to preventing athletes from injury due to lightening strikes is to have a plan. The steps for the plan should include”

1. having a chain of command set up in advance
2. appoint someone to monitor the weather visually and by radio
3. identify safe locations near by for people to evacuate to
4. specificity of suspension

The second step is making sure that there are safe shelters near by. What are safe shelters? They should be permanent structures that people live/work in. They can also be a substantial and frequently inhabited building that has electrical, phone and plumbing.

A secondary shelter can be a fully enclosed vehicle with metal roof and windows closed. A secondary shelter IS NOT a convertible, jeep, golf cart, picnic shelter or dug out.

How do I know when we should seek shelter? The third step is the “Flash to Bang Theory” to monitor the closeness of the storm. When you see the lightning, count how many seconds before you hear the bang. If you hear the “bang” at 30 seconds that means the storm is within 6 miles of you. A five second “flash to bang” means that it is one mile away. With a 30 second “flash to bang count”, you should get to shelter immediately.

So how long do I wait before I can resume my activity? Use the 30-30 rule. You should wait 30 minutes after the last sound of thunder or lightening flash.

If you are caught in a lightening storm, you need to get in a “lightening safe position”. This means:

1. crouched
2. weight on the balls of your feet
3. feet together
4. head lowered
5. ears covered

Some guidelines to follow when there are lightening are:

1. use the flash-bang theory
2. postpone activity if weather is threatening
3. have a plan for “safe shelters” for athletes and spectators
4. avoid height
5. avoid open water
6. avoid telephones (cell phones and cordless are okay)
7. know the lightening safe position
8. only resume activity after 30 minutes of no lightening or thunder

All individuals have the right to leave an athletic site or activity in order to seek a safer structure if a person feels he or she is in danger of lightening without fear or repercussion.

Remember, that sports are just a “game”. No athletic or recreational activity is worth someone being struck by lightning. Make sure to review with your team, group, etc. lightening safe precautions. This should include a drill to practice where they are to go and what they are to do.

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