

DOCTOR'S REFORM CALL

'Ban kids from heading footballs to protect brains'

TOP EXPERT WARNS OF CONCUSSION'S EFFECTS



PRACTICE: The couple
Joy of flex for Harry...

PRINCE Harry is learning the perfect downward dog pose as girlfriend Meghan Markle teaches him yoga. Pals close to the royal revealed she is helping him to limber up and de-stress by taking up the ancient Indian practice.

He is joining in floor routines and learning how to bend and flex like his US sweetheart.

One source said: "Meghan has been loving sharing her pastime with her man."

Strong

"Now she has been helping Harry experiment with some positions."

The insider added: "Harry is strong still from his Army time, so mastering forward falls, planks and upward dogs have been easy going."

VOTE FOR IRELAND'S CUTEST BABY



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WORRY: Kevin Doyle (also left) leaves pitch during an Ireland game over a head injury



CONCERN: Dr Sabina Brennan

A LEADING brain expert is calling for a ban on kids under 10 heading footballs in soccer practice or games.

Dr Sabina Brennan of Trinity Brain Health made the call on the back of former Irish international Kevin Doyle announcing his retirement over his concerns about concussion and its symptoms.

She is also urging sports players of all ages to move away from a dangerous "toughing it out" attitude over concussion.

Guidelines were introduced by the US Soccer Federation several years ago after parents took a class action suit charging FIFA, US Soccer and American Youth Soccer Organisation with negligence. Now only players aged between 11 and 13 can head the ball but only during practice — not in games.

Policy

"There would be no harm in doing something similar with guidelines like these to protect our children," Dr Brennan told

The Star, adding that US data showed more high school soccer players sustained concussion than athletes in wrestling, baseball, basketball and softball combined.

Nicola DONNELLY

She wants more research, education, awareness and public policy into preventing concussion in sports.

"I think Kevin Doyle has made a very smart decision in putting his brain before his game," she said.

"Prevention of concussion is the primary focus but the rigid rules need to be in place once a concussion is sustained."

Doyle said this year it became clear that heading was becoming problematic and causing him to have repeated headaches.

He was concussed twice this season and numerous other times in the past.

"After consulting with experts it has been decided that to avoid the possibility of these symptoms becoming more serious and permanent, I will be hanging up my boots for good," he said.

Dr Brennan said she always felt rugby was unfairly singled out as a dangerous sport for concussion injuries, when concussion accounts for 22 per cent of soccer injuries.

"In Ireland we have 450,000 soccer players, 400,000 GAA players and 180,000 rugby players," she said,

adding: "Statistics show soccer players make an average of six to seven headers per game — that's as much as 800 in a professional career."

Dr Brennan added: "Concussion is a brain injury caused by trauma that is transmitted to the brain and results in impairment of brain function."

"It can be caused by a direct blow to the head or when a player takes a hard knock to another part of the body resulting in a rapid movement of the head causing a disturbance of brain function."

Chronic

She said concussion is particularly problematic in children because the effects last longer and their brains are far more vulnerable.

Meanwhile, the English Football Association and Professional Footballers' Association are said to be close to announcing the launch of a study into a possible link between heading the ball and brain injuries.

Many former players, families and brain-injury experts have been calling for more and better research on the issue ever since ex-West Brom forward Jeff Astle died from chronic traumatic encephalopathy in 2002.

'Kevin has made a very smart decision'

FACING CRISIS HEAD ON... PAGES 28&29