



What athletic directors and coaches need to know to keep their athletes with **sickle cell trait** safe.

# Raising Awareness For Isaiah



# Isaiah's Story



Isaiah Turner was a 17-year-old rising high school senior at La Salle College High School, where he was a star athlete who contributed to both the basketball and football teams. As described by his coaches, teachers and friends, Isaiah was a “gentle giant” who was a selfless and well-liked member of the school community. He excelled in courses on information sciences, public speaking and Chinese. Isaiah was curious and funny, and was interested in cultural exploration. He looked forward to following his parents’ example by continuing his education. Several universities with Division I football programs were actively recruiting Isaiah, with some expressing interest in awarding him a scholarship.

Unfortunately, Isaiah did not live to realize his dreams of going to college or playing college football. Like many African Americans, he was a carrier of the Sickle Cell Trait (SCT), and Isaiah’s mother dutifully filled out health history forms for his school’s athletic department for three consecutive years, fully advising as to Isaiah’s SCT status. Yet, Isaiah died on September 4, 2020, alone, on his high school football field shortly after experiencing the warning signs of an exertional sickle cell crisis during a preseason practice. His life of extraordinary promise was cut short because his school’s athletic and medical staff were uninformed of the risk that SCT can pose to student athletes if proper precautions are not taken, and staff failed to recognize that Isaiah’s symptoms required an emergency response.

On the day of Isaiah’s death, the football team was practicing in hot and somewhat humid weather conditions. After more than two hours and during the waning minutes of a conditioning session, Isaiah collapsed near midfield. He was experiencing leg cramping, and his

offensive line coach worked on stretching him out. He was helped to the sideline, where the entire team congregated for the end of the practice. Isaiah laid down because he was unable to stand. There was no medical or training staff present, and Isaiah was given two bottles of Gatorade. He complained of leg pain so severe that he was losing feeling in his toes. Not recognizing the hallmark signs of an exertional sickling medical emergency, the 12-person adult coaching staff ended the practice and left Isaiah in the care of his 17-year-old friend and teammate to drive Isaiah home.

Isaiah could not make the walk to the locker room, so his teammate left the field to drive his car closer. After parking closer, he returned to Isaiah, who indicated that he would not be able to make the shorter walk and asked him to move the car even closer. Isaiah’s teammate left to move the car again, and when he returned he found Isaiah lying on his back unconscious. He called 9-1-1 and began performing CPR while on the phone with the emergency call center. Isaiah was transported to a local hospital where he was pronounced dead.

Tragically, Isaiah is but one in a long line of athletes with the Sickle Cell Trait — particularly football players — who have died unnecessarily from exertional sickling.

Feldman Shepherd attorney Mark W. Tanner represented Isaiah’s family in a lawsuit against La Salle College High School, which settled in November 2023 for \$12 million. Feldman Shepherd subsequently launched the “Raising Awareness for Isaiah” campaign to honor Isaiah’s memory, raise awareness and combat unnecessary deaths by providing life-saving information on the Sickle Cell Trait to high school athletic directors.



# The Sickle Cell Trait

The **Sickle Cell Trait** is an inherited blood disorder which can result in the “sickling” of red blood cells. Though it impacts persons of all ethnicities, it is most prevalent in people of color, affecting up to one in every 11 individuals. In most cases there are no symptoms until or unless an acute crisis arises, typically due to the combination of heat and exertion. Accordingly, the SCT presents particular risks to athletes and otherwise physically active individuals. Red blood cells are responsible for delivering oxygen throughout the athlete’s body. During the intense exercise that is common in student athletics, the red blood cells of SCT-carriers can change shape and physically sickle, becoming rigid and incapable of effectively carrying oxygen. This condition can lead to muscle damage (rhabdomyolysis) and organ damage, ultimately resulting in death. The early warning signs of a such a crisis include cramping, pain, weakness and fatigue.

It is important for high school coaches and athletic programs to be aware of SCT-carriers and to have staff training and **Emergency Action Plans** in place for preventing and managing a potential crisis.

**THE MOST FEARED ADVERSE OUTCOME OF SCT IS  
EXERCISE-ASSOCIATED COLLAPSE AND/OR DEATH.**

- “SICKLE CELL TRAIT - WHY THE CONCERN IN HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS,”  
BY YVETTE ROOKS, M.D., CAQ, FAAFP ON OCTOBER 09, 2018



# Guidelines for Athletic Directors & Coaches

## Students with Sickle Cell Trait Can Participate in Sports

Most athletes with SCT will train and play without ever experiencing exercise-related problems. However, in the rare case that they do, athletic directors and coaches have a duty to have protocols in place to keep their athletes safe.

**Athletic directors must  
develop a plan.**

### **Know Your Athletes and the Warning Signs**

- Carefully review physical exam and health history report for all athletes.
- Be sure your coaches and training staff are aware of which athletes, if any, carry the Sickle Cell Trait.
- Educate staff and players about the warning signs of exercise-induced illness and discuss a plan for what should be done if symptoms arise.

### **Symptoms May Include:**

- Muscle cramping without tingling
- Muscle weakness, athlete may slump to the ground
- Rapid breathing
- Feeling overheated
- Prolonged exhaustion



### **Condition Safely and Manage the Symptoms**

All athletes should condition safely. Those who carry SCT should stay hydrated, limit caffeine and energy drinks, and begin exercise gradually.

Should a player experience symptoms of exercise-induced illness, stop exercising immediately. Efforts should be made to rest, hydrate and cool the player.

#### **What to Do:**

- Stop exercising immediately; allow the player to rest
- Check vital signs
- Administer high-flow oxygen
- Provide water to rehydrate the athlete
- Move the player to a cool place and cool with wet towels or ice, if necessary

**Symptoms should improve with rest.  
If not, call 911.**

### **Get Emergence Assistance, If Necessary**

If symptoms do not improve or get worse, seek emergency medical care.



# RESOURCES

Follow these resources for additional background and current recommendations for athletes who carry the sickle cell trait.

National Federation of State High School Associations

<https://www.nfhs.org/articles/sickle-cell-trait-why-the-concern-in-high-school-sports/>

National Athletic Trainers' Association

<https://www.nata.org/sites/default/files/sickle-cell-trait-handout.pdf>

National Collegiate Athletic Association

<https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2016/7/27/sickle-cell-trait.aspx>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/sicklecell/documents/sickle-cell-athletes.pdf>

**OF 136 SUDDEN, NON-TRAUMATIC SPORTS DEATHS IN  
HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE ATHLETES OVER A DECADE,  
5 PERCENT WERE DUE TO EXERTIONAL SICKLING.  
- JUNE 27, 2007 NATIONAL ATHLETIC TRAINERS' ASSOCIATION  
"SICKLE CELL TRAIT AND THE ATHLETE" CONSENSUS STATEMENT**



"By all accounts, Isaiah Turner was a wonderful young man. He was a gifted athlete, talented in the classroom, and a much-loved friend, teammate, son, and brother. Tragically, he was also one of the latest in a long line of athletes — particularly football players — who died unnecessarily due to a very preventable and treatable condition. The primary way to combat these unnecessary deaths is through information and awareness, and we intend to honor Isaiah's memory through educational efforts in hopes that no other young athlete meets a similar fate."

— Mark W. Tanner, co-managing partner at  
Feldman Shepherd Wohlgelernter Tanner  
Weinstock Dodig LLP, who represented  
Isaiah's family in wrongful death litigation

"For an athlete like Isaiah who has the Sickle Cell Trait, these common-sense precautions can mean the difference between life and death. No parent should have to suffer the unimaginable heartbreak of losing a child to a preventable death, and it is essential that all coaches and trainers take the time to educate themselves so that athletes like Isaiah can safely participate in sports at all levels. Please familiarize yourselves with this information, as young lives depend upon it."

— Kimberly Snowden,  
Isaiah's Mother





## Raising Awareness For Isaiah



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