**[More Softball Pitchers Adopt Face Masks](http://www.athleticbusiness.com/athlete-safety/more-softball-pitchers-adopt-face-masks.html)**

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It's every softball pitcher's worst nightmare.

The ball — 12 inches in circumference and weighing nearly 7 ounces — jumps off the hitter's aluminum bat and heads directly at the face of the pitcher, who starts her windup 43 feet from home plate.

"There is no way of reacting," Central Islip High School sophomore pitcher Haley Lomax said.

Lomax, 15, was hit in the face with a line drive while pitching during a varsity softball game on April 27. She could not get her glove up or duck out of the way.

But she is among a growing number of high school softball players on Long Island and nationwide who are choosing to wear a protective face mask.

The ball ricocheted off Lomax's face mask and grazed the side of her head. She was initially startled, but Lomax was not injured and was able to continue pitching. If not for the face mask, Lomax is certain the damage would have been severe.

"I definitely would have lost a lot of teeth," she said. "I could have got really hurt."

The steel-rimmed masks resemble a football face mask but instead of being attached to a helmet, the mask is held in place by adjustable straps that wrap around the top and sides of a player's head. There is padding around the player's forehead and chin to absorb the impact of a blow.

The face masks are optional, but more and more pitchers — and even some infielders — are choosing to wear the equipment that was virtually nonexistent just a few years ago.

"When my daughter was younger and we'd watch the older girls play, I don't think anybody had masks," said Haley's father, Octavio Lomax, who coaches Little League softball. "Then over the years, you started to see them here and there.

"Now it's become like a piece of the uniform."

**Concerns over head injuries**

Players said they are wearing face masks to protect themselves from the serious injuries that result from getting hit in the face with a batted ball so close to home plate. There are no statistics available that show the number of players who get hit in the face on Long Island or nationwide, but experts say the incidents are rare.

Newsday and News 12 spoke to five Long Island girls who were hit in the face with a line drive while pitching, including two who were hit this season.

Players and their parents are concerned about the dangers of concussions. There has been increased awareness in all sports about the dangers of head injuries, but experts said there is no evidence to show that wearing a face mask would reduce the risk of suffering a concussion if struck with a batted ball.

There were 36 suspected concussions among the 3,335 girls playing high school softball on Long Island last year, or one for every 92.6 players, according to concussion reports obtained from more than 100 schools via Freedom of Information Law requests and sport-specific participation figures obtained from the New York State Public High School Athletic Association, the state's governing body for public school sports.

Line drives to the face were just one of several scenarios that led to a concussion, according to injury descriptions listed on reports obtained by Newsday. Other incidents that led to suspected concussions included players getting hit in the head by a missed fly ball, errant throw or a bat, an on-field collision with another player or a fall to the ground.

Girls were more likely to suffer concussions in soccer (one per 40.7 players), basketball (one per 53.7 players) and lacrosse (one per 68.2 players) than they were in softball, according to numbers compiled by Newsday.

In a series of interviews with Newsday and News 12, parents, coaches, athletic directors and state athletic officials said the increased use of face masks in high school softball can be attributed to several key factors:

- Youth softball leagues across Long Island began mandating that pitchers wear face masks several years ago. Those players are now playing in high school and don't think twice about wearing them.

- Players say they wear face masks because they have been hit in the face by a line drive or they have seen another player get hit.

- There is a concern among coaches that aluminum bats are too lively, creating what is commonly referred to as "a trampoline effect" on the ball. Recent technological advancements have allowed manufacturers to produce bats that are lighter to swing yet more powerful.

- Parents have placed a greater emphasis on the importance of head protection because of increased awareness of the effects of head injuries and concussions.

**Too close for comfort**

While the basic rules of softball are the same as baseball - both games are played with a ball, bat, gloves and bases - there are distinct differences.

High school fast-pitch softball is a game played by girls in which pitchers stand 43 feet from the hitter and throw as hard as 60 mph using an underhand windmill motion. Baseball pitchers throw overhand and start their delivery 60 feet, 6 inches away from home plate.

Experts say a pitcher's reaction time is similar in both sports because baseball pitchers typically throw harder, but the softball pitcher's proximity to the hitter and the bigger, heavier ball has led to a push for more protection.

"By the time the pitcher strides and releases that ball, they can almost shake hands with the batters," said Octavio Lomax.

Lloyd Smith, a professor at Washington State University's Sports Science Laboratory, has studied the impact forces that are generated when softballs and the modern aluminum bats meet. He said a 70-mph batted ball speed — which represents some of the hardest hit balls on the high school level — would reach the pitcher in 0.375 seconds.

**A recent trend**

In high school softball, face masks were "unheard of" as recently as a decade ago, according to Carol Bruggeman, executive director of National Fastpitch Coaches Association, a nationwide industry group of coaches on all levels, including high school.

Now, at varsity softball games across Long Island, it has become common to see face masks being worn by the pitchers and infielders.

"A few years ago you were a pariah if you wore one of those face masks, because it was so odd looking," said Dennis McSweeney, Islip coach since 2007. "No one ever wants to be the only one wearing something. But now it's become the fabric of the game for so many players."

Lomax resisted wearing a face mask for years.

"I didn't want to look weird in front of people," she said.

Lomax said her thinking changed when she made the varsity team as a freshman and saw how hard the ball was being hit up the middle.

"My parents were bugging me for a while and then I finally said, 'I need to wear it,' " she said. "I just wanted to be safe."

Now her family has firsthand experience of their value.

"That $39.99 was the best money spent," her father said.

**Better safe than sorry**

Jessica Budrewicz, a 16-year-old MacArthur High School junior who is among the top pitchers on Long Island, said she has worn a face mask for as long she has played softball.

"My dad always wanted me to wear one," she said. "He always told me it's better to stay safe than sorry."

She has never been hit in the face, but a few years ago she was watching a college game on television and saw a pitcher get hit. She said the image on the screen of the bloody pitcher scared her.

"I was glad I wear one when I saw that," she said.

**'It scared her'**

Kat Fennell, a Westhampton High School junior, was hit in the head by a line drive during a junior-varsity game two years ago. She suffered a concussion and missed about a month of the season. The experience has stayed with her.

"I didn't know if I wanted to pitch or not after that," she said. "I continued to do it, but I feel like I lost a lot. I became more nervous pitching. I kind of gave up on pitching a little bit. Even though I still do it, I don't want to stay with it as much as I did before."

Her mother, Laura, pitched in college for Colorado State University and then St. John's University. She said she didn't like the idea of pitchers wearing face masks when she first started seeing them a few years back because masks gave players a false sense of security and de-emphasized proper techniques.

Then she saw her daughter get hit and changed her mind.

"I don't think I ever saw a ball come off the bat like it did when it came at her head," Laura Fennell said. "She got her glove up, but she got hit. But the girls really are bigger and stronger now, and the bats today are better.

"It scared her, it really did."

Fennell, 16, now wears a face mask when she pitches.

**Focus on the bats**

Even though the use of face masks has risen in recent years, experts do not expect them to be mandated on the high school level anytime soon.

The state Public High School Athletic Association debated mandating face masks two years ago, according to assistant director Todd Nelson. He said the discussion was spurred by reports of players getting hit in the head.

The group decided to not require the face masks because the National Operating Committee on Standards for Athletic Equipment (NOCSAE), which sets safety standards for most athletic equipment, has not developed any guidelines for face masks that do not have helmets attached to them, Nelson said.

Dawn Comstock, a University of Colorado epidemiology professor who has tracked high school sports injuries since 2005, said her injury surveillance data - which she receives from a group of 100 high schools across the country annually - shows that pitchers in softball are not sustaining head injuries at a greater rate than other positions.

Head and face injuries that required surgery represent only 1 percent of high school softball injuries since 2005, she said.

"What I don't understand is the fear that's driving the use of this," said Michael Oliver, NOCSAE's executive director. "I've watched literally thousands of games . . . and I've never seen a pitcher get hit with a batted ball."

Nelson said that instead of mandating face masks, the softball committee has placed a greater emphasis on ensuring that the bats being used are legal. An illegal bat regularly produces a batted ball speed greater than 98 miles per hour during the certification testing process by USA Softball, the sport's national governing body. That threshold was set in 2004.

Before every game umpires are required to check each team's bats to make sure none of them match one of the 47 bats on the USA Softball list of "nonapproved" bats.

"I don't think there's enough data to say that a face mask would protect a kid in the event of a catastrophic injury," said Jim Wright, Whitman High School athletic director and Suffolk County softball coordinator. "It's about the bats. It's not about anything else but the bats."

**No time to react**

Macy Kane, a senior pitcher at Floyd High School in Mastic Beach, was hit in the face last month and described what she remembers seeing as "a blob of yellow coming at my face." All she could do was turn her head.

"I didn't know what else to do, the ball was coming so quick," she said.

When the ball ricocheted off her left cheek, Kane instantly dropped to the ground and covered her face. Teammates and coaches surrounded her, asking where she got hit.

Somehow, Kane was OK. It just grazed her cheek, she said. She even persuaded her coach to let her stay in the game. Days later she barely had any swelling or bruising.

"I definitely know I was lucky," she said.

Macy said she will start wearing a face mask, but not until she starts playing in college.

Only 19 months ago, Macy's older sister, Brooke, also was struck in the head by a softball while she was pitching for Monroe College in the Bronx. But Brooke's experience was far different from Macy's.

The line drive hit her on the upper left side of her face. She was knocked unconscious and broke two bones in her ankle on her fall.

When she regained consciousness moments later, she was asked if she knew her name. Macy said Brooke gave her roommate's name.

"That could have happened," Brooke said. "I honestly don't remember."

Her concussion symptoms lasted for weeks. Her ankle rehab took months. She didn't play softball for nearly a year. At first she didn't know if she even wanted to pitch again.

When Brooke finally did return to the mound last fall, she wore a face mask — something she wanted no part of before getting hit because it was "uncomfortable. I didn't like it and when I was in high school not a lot of people wore it."

"I'm not playing if I don't wear that now," she said. "Just because you can't even see the ball coming at you sometimes."

She said she still flinches when a ball is hit back at her. She said that if she wore a face mask during the game she was hit, there's no way she would have been hurt as severely.

"I still would have been scared and all, but it wouldn't have taken me out a year like it did," she said.

Their mother, Christina, thinks face masks should be mandatory for softball pitchers at all levels. Brooke agrees.

"All it takes," Brooke said, "is that one unlucky hit."

**Softball pitching numbers**

- 43 feet The distance between the pitcher and home plate in softball. After releasing the pitch, the pitcher will often be three to five feet closer.

- 60 mph The speed at which some of the top high school pitchers can throw the ball.

- 70 mph The speed at which some of the hardest hit balls come off the bat at the high school level.

- 0.375 seconds The time it takes a batted ball traveling at 70 mph to reach the pitcher.