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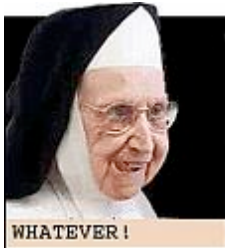
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A Hit Video About Hitting

A Hit Video About Hitting

Donated to 38,000 high schools in 48 states, its cautionary look at injuries draws raves

By Paul McLeod
Times Staff Writer

September 30, 2003

Classmates in the late 1960s at the University of Tennessee tabbed Robert Watkins "The Fan" because of his appetite for sporting events such as hard-hitting Volunteer football games.

Now a physician and expert on spinal injuries, Watkins still loves to watch the game he played as a high school kid in his native Memphis, Tenn.

The hard-hitting part, though, can be problematic.

With backing from partner Lytton Williams, Watkins has spent eight years - and some of his own money - to create and distribute a free videotape to high school coaches and players that demonstrates proper blocking and tackling techniques. The pair, co-directors of the Los

Angeles Spine Surgery Institute at St. Vincent Medical Center, hope "See What You Hit" helps prevent serious spinal injuries.

Mostly because of Watkins' determination, copies of the video have been donated through state associations to about 38,000 high schools in 48 states. Spine in Sports, the foundation created by Watkins and Williams to oversee the short film, estimates that "See What You Hit" has been seen by more than 1 million players.

In the last 25 years, 183 high school football players have suffered significant spinal cord injuries, according to the National Center for Catastrophic Sports Injury Research. That would classify such injuries as somewhat rare. Nevertheless, Watkins maintains that one paralyzed player is one too many.

"It's not an epidemic," he said. "It can be prevented. But it's an ever-present risk."

After seeing three head-related football injuries to patients during the winter of 1995-96, Watkins approached Williams. They coaxed such notables as former Dodger executive vice president Fred Claire, former Angel president Tony Tavares and former Laker team doctor Michael Mellman to sit on the board of Spine in Sports.

It took three more years to put together the video. Watkins had seen tapes done by physicians in the South and East, but those were more like training tapes, he said.

"I wanted to have a videotape that kids would watch, something interesting with real pro football players in it that would catch their attention," Watkins said.

The final product, completed three years ago for \$100,000, touches briefly on the life of Kenyana Tolbert, a football and basketball standout from Little Rock, Ark., who was paralyzed while making a tackle in a high school football game.

Tolbert had received a scholarship offer to play both sports at Oklahoma State, but he has not been able to walk since making that play. The video includes brief interviews with Watkins and Williams and instruction from Oakland Raider secondary Coach Ron Lynn, then with the New England Patriots. Lynn details proper stances and reminds viewers to keep their heads up and "see what you hit." Former All-Pros Charles Haley, Ty Law and Lawyer Milloy also appear in the film.

Watkins liked the final product, but distribution languished because the foundation ran out of money.

"We were not pro marketers, but we had hopes of covering our costs by hooking up with bigger sports apparel or football-related companies," said Andrew Watkins, Robert's oldest son and the current director of the foundation. "We had trouble finding a sponsor."

Moved by years of treating patients with spinal injuries, Robert Watkins was determined to see his pet project through.

"Your child goes to football practice one day. It's the most routine thing in the world for a parent," he said. "Then you get a call that something has happened like this. It's the random nature of things like this that are so terrifying."

Eventually, Andrew Watkins, an attorney who works for the Dodgers, found himself on the living room floor of his father's home licking envelopes and addressing labels. His father was often at his side.

"I got tired of hearing him complain about it not getting done," Andrew said.

Andrew Watkins, a walk-on water polo coach at South Pasadena High, hired students and day laborers to help complete packaging and mailing. Then he found a company that cut reproduction costs of each tape from \$20 a tape to about \$1 each. Using bulk mail cut more costs.

Meanwhile, his father called acquaintances around the country, collecting a few bucks here and there in exchange for listing their name in the credits of the video.

The first big shipment went out to Oregon in September 2001. "See What You Hit" remains available free of charge at spineinsports.org. Watkins hopes that the foundation can regroup to produce additional educational information for other sports and endeavors.

That would suit USC Coach Pete Carroll, who said that quality training films are hard to come by.

"I think we should do it in weightlifting and everything," he said. "I think we should do it in a lot of ways, so kids don't get hurt in the weight room and don't get overworked in conditioning."

Redondo Union High football Coach Gene Simon, who has shown the tape to players, said that he has never met Robert Watkins, but is impressed with Watkins' determination in completing his goal.

"He has done our game a real service," Simon said.

*

Times Staff Writer Gary Klein contributed to this story.

How to get a free copy of the 10-minute videotape from spine specialists Drs. Robert Watkins and Lytton Williams that teaches proper blocking and tackling techniques, or to support its production with a tax deductible donation:

By mail:

Spine in Sports Foundation

P/O Box 26368

Los Angeles, Ca. 90026

By phone:

(866) 847-7463 (84-Spine)

Web site: <http://www.spineinsports.org>

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