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A CT woman inspired a sports team to buy a heart defibrillator. ‘The Damar Hamlin effect is real’



Hayley Dougela

The UMBF Hands-only CPR and AED training session in partnership with In A Heartbeat Foundation Mike Papale is at left. Please give photo credit to Hayley Dougela for these camp pics



By [MIKE SAVINO](#) | Special to the Hartford Courant

PUBLISHED: October 18, 2023 at 5:45 a.m. | UPDATED: October 18, 2023 at 3:39 p.m.

Two amateur Massachusetts soccer teams were battling out an early season [Bay State Soccer League](#) match when things came to a sudden stop.

A player on the [Kendall Wanderers](#) suffered sudden cardiac arrest and dropped to the ground. The player was saved thanks, in part, to an [automatic electronic defibrillator](#) the team had at the game.

“One shock brought our player back and he continues to recover well after being released from the hospital,” the Wanderers said in a statement.

They also credited a West Hartford resident Suzanne McKenzie and her advocacy for getting the team to purchase the AED in the first place.

McKenzie is founder of the [Ucal McKenzie Breakaway Foundation](#), an organization that uses youth soccer camps to teach young athletes about CPR, heart health, concussions, hydration and other topics.

The organization also provides AEDs to recreational soccer leagues around Boston. Suzanne McKenzie started the organization in honor of her husband, Ucal, who died at the age of 32 from sudden cardiac arrest during a soccer game against the Wanderers 14 years ago.

“If you’re in a public space ... it’s really rolling the dice unless you have your own (AED) or if you know exactly where the device is,” McKenzie said.

The Wanderers said they wanted to share the news of the Sept. 17 incident as a way to urge recreational sports league around the country to purchase AEDs.

“AEDs aren’t exactly cheap, but they have been coming down in cost over the years, and that makes them attainable for about what an amateur sports club might spend on a new kit run (uniforms) — around \$1,000,” the Wanderers said in the statement.

It’s a push medical experts have been making for years.

“If I were to have one piece of equipment on a sideline, it would be an AED,” said Robert Huggins, president of research and athletic performance and safety at the [University of Connecticut’s Korey Stringer Institute](#).

Youth sports leagues have taken steps in recent years to better handle brain injuries amid growing research about the impact of chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE, a [disease associated with repeated traumatic brain injuries](#).

The Stringer Institute, meanwhile, was launched at UConn after Minnesota Vikings offensive tackle [Korey Stringer](#) died of complications from heat stroke during a practice in August of 2001. That led to changes in how football and other sports handle excessive heat.

Huggins said some parents and youth sports organizers had not been as attentive to cardiac arrest, at least until recently.

“The [Damar Hamlin](#) effect has been real,” he said.

Hamlin, a defensive back with the Buffalo Bills, had to be resuscitated on the field after a hit to the head during a Monday Night Football game against the Cincinnati Bengals in January. The life-saving measures happened during the live broadcast.

Danish midfielder Christian Eriksen collapsed during an international soccer match in June 2021 and also had to be resuscitated on the field. More recently, LeBron James’ son, Bronny, [suffered cardiac arrest during a basketball practice](#) at the University of Southern California.

“It happens at every single age, it’s not just people over 50,” McKenzie said.

Her organization has been running its youth soccer camps in Boston, where her husband was a coach, for 15 years. The Ucal McKenzie Breakaway Foundation also recently started a camp in Hartford.

Her foundation also partners with the [In a Heartbeat](#) foundation to provide AEDs to youth soccer leagues.

McKenzie also launched a clothing line, Able Made, and uses the proceeds to fund her organization. [Able Made has a store at the Westfarms Mall](#).

The camps include education on hands-free CPR and how to use AEDs. The Wanderers said one of the players in their Sept. 17 game was a firefighter and knew how to use the device.

“Unless you really know about what to do, it can be very intimidating and scary,” McKenzie said.

According to the Wanderers, the AED was activated within three minutes and 40 seconds.

Huggins said there’s little time to react — when talking with sports leagues and sanctioning bodies, he suggests having an AED within three minutes of each athletic venue.

“Many organizations acknowledge that it’s important but they’re very hesitant to try and implement any sort of mandate or policy unless the state has some sort of law or requirement,” he said.

Data is hard to come by because youth sports leagues aren’t required to report sudden athlete deaths to a single entity.

Huggins, who authored a report using emergency room records and media reports, said sudden cardiac arrest is the most common cause of death, followed by heat and head trauma.

A separate study found the rate of sudden deaths rose from [1.8 per 10 million athlete years](#) — a measure that tracks one season played by one athlete — in 2007 to 3.84 per 10 million in 2015.

Huggins said it's hard to know if that is a trend or whether data became easier to find because parents and the media became more aware of sudden deaths. Social media also makes it easier to find reports.

Either way, Huggins said parents and organizers are slowly becoming more aware of the need for AEDs.

The Wanderers purchased the AED used in the Sept. 17 match, but credited McKenzie and her advocacy with making them aware of the need. McKenzie said she hopes her camps get more players and their families to push to have devices at their games.