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HEADLINE: UNANCHORED SOCCER GOALS CAN POSE A DANGER

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Like most youth soccer players, 8-year-old Julia Parisi of Rye Brook, N.Y., was looking forward to a fall soccer game like those experienced by tens of thousands of kids across the country each Saturday morning.

Ten days later, however, the 8-year-old goalie was lucky she could walk at all.

As her coach and father, John, was searching for a hammer to secure the goals on the field his daughter's team would play on, a gust of wind caused the goal to tumble and fall on Julia. The accident crushed the bone that connects her knee and hip into a half-dozen pieces; doctors compared the battered leg to that of a victim who had been viciously attacked with a sledgehammer.

To blame the wind would be easy, and in this case at least partially accurate. But each year it is estimated that 120 Americans are injured by falling soccer goals, the main culprit being homemade, unbalanced and/or unanchored goalposts. Thus, the wind is not all that's to blame.

Because of the unusual risk for recreational players, soccer organizations across the country have put in place regulations requiring goals to be anchored to the ground or counterweighted for correct balance.

And as another fall soccer season begins this week in the Madison area and beyond, safety is again at the forefront.

"The cost of the safety is actually the intangible cost of payroll or time," said Keith McHugh, Executive Director of the Madison Area Youth Soccer Association. "When goals are anchored, it takes longer to maintain the grounds because the goals take longer to move, and then move back. For the larger organizations that have a number of fields - city municipalities and the like - that can add up. The cost of the anchors can be found online but as far as I'm concerned all of it is negligible compared to what is being protected."

Most rules regulating anchors, however, only specifically apply to league games, leaving the onus of practice protection in coaches' hands and unattended goals under the prevision of supervising adults. While soccer enthusiasts may consider an unused goal the perfect place for independent practice or a friendly scrimmage, to some children the goal can represent an impromptu play set.

In Houston in June, an 11-year-old boy was fatally injured after climbing on the netting of a goal inside a local park. The goal came crashing down, dealing a fatal blow to his forehead.

Since 1979, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission reports, at least 30 deaths have been caused by soccer goals falling over. While no one involved in Madison's soccer community can remember a single serious incident of local goals toppling, the danger persists nonetheless.

"The subject of goals falling on players has been in issue throughout the States over the past few years," said Scott Clement, president of the Verona Area Soccer Club. "Safety concerns dealing with goals have been passed on to our club and all

others in the Madison area via our local district organization, (MAYSA) and our state organization (Wisconsin Youth Soccer Association). It is also covered in referee certification classes and checking the goals is part of a referee's duties prior to starting a match."

"It has been addressed by implementing a policy that does not permit a match to be played if goals are not anchored," McHugh said. "To the best of my knowledge it has never happened in the Madison area, and only keeping a vigilant attitude about the matter will help keep it that way."

While unmovable goalposts anchored for safety present a very small problem, mobile goals which can be erected each weekend for play must be both properly stored and set up each weekend to protect anyone using them.

"For fields, goal anchors are the responsibility of the owners of the field or the club/organization that has agreed to accept that responsibility," McHugh said. "At Reddan Soccer Park (in Verona), all goals are anchored when any activity is utilizing them. Most of the goals are also counter balanced, but are still anchored regardless of whether or not they seem stable."

As soccer's popularity grows the risk of goal accidents rises in part because more homemade goals are finding their way into action across the country. Because homemade goals are often heavier, weighing upwards of 500 pounds, and more unstable than manufactured ones, the CPSC is working hard to see them removed from use.

With an estimated half-million goals across the country, the risk remains. After the latest death in Houston, that city re-inspected 126 public soccer goals, re-anchoring 63 and removing 11. The unanchored goal that prompted the sweep was determined to be homemade and added to the park after the city's annual inspection of goals.

"Goals are a lot like lightning and automobiles," McHugh said. "They are only a big problem if people don't respect what they can do."

In 2003, after their son Zach, 6, was killed by a falling soccer goal in Libertyville, Ill., the Tran family of Indian Hills, Ill., started an initiative known as Anchored For Safety in an attempt to limit the number of future deaths. Anchoredforsafety.com is now the premier site for soccer goal safety.

"The short-term solution is to make sure all goals are properly anchored. However, Anchored for Safety is working on a more permanent solution; to promote the use of goals that are safe, anchored or unanchored," said AFS co-founder Jayson Tran, Zach's father.

Anchors can be purchased on the Internet for as little as \$1.95.