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Protective headgear maker at odds with U.S. Lacrosse

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Robert Cleva has been involved in helmet making for years, even patenting a design for a bike helmet after he was dissatisfied with those on the market. But he has hit a roadblock after thinking he had filled a niche in sports head gear.

Cleva's latest invention was hit the market last year — a protective helmet that looks like a ski cap. It has "impact protective" inserts throughout the acrylic cap. His company is called [Crasche New York](#), selling all sorts of sports head protection.

The product looks like it would be the answer for Major League Baseball, which has been struggling to find a protective cap for pitchers. However, Cleva thought he had found a market in parents of girls lacrosse players, [according to the Long Island Press](#).

Cleva discovered one problem: The cap could sustain a stick to the head but not a ball to the head.

In February 2012 he'd submitted the hat model to US Lacrosse (USL), the sport's national governing body, based in Baltimore, where the first women's lacrosse team played in the United States in 1926. The league itself has been debating how to address the concussion issue — a debate that Cleva inadvertently got caught up in. At first, he got an encouraging reply from Melissa Coyne, the women's game director at USL.

“Your product complies with current USL rules for women’s lacrosse,” Coyne emailed Cleva in March 2012. “Hope that helps!”

But with the test results in hand, Cleva decided to redesign his product so it could withstand a ball speeding to the head at 78 mph and reduce the impact below the concussive level.

“We re-engineered it, and informed US Lacrosse that we’d made some changes,” Cleva says. “We opened it up — took the top off — because the girls didn’t want the skull cap, they wanted their hair [coming] out the top.”

Cleva’s answer was a protective product that looks more like a winter head band with wire goggles. So far, he said he has received good response to the product — except from U.S. Lacrosse, the sport’s governing body which has banned the product until Cleva makes some changes.

“It happened to be seen by one of our rules committee members who brought up the fact that this product was different from the one that we had approved and this had not been approved,” Coyne tells the Press. “It’s significantly different.” She added that the Crasche Middie brochure “made some pretty incredible claims of its protective value, and that concerned some members of our organization, specifically our sports, science and safety committee...”

After Cleva submitted his new headgear for their examination, the USL’s rules subcommittee determined that the product was “deemed illegal for play.” In their email to him, they said it violated “portions of Rule 2” regarding “Soft Head Gear ... defined as any head covering without hard or unyielding parts that have the potential to injure another player. The product, Crasche Middie, contains hard inserts that are not unyielding which could possibly pose a danger to other players. Additionally, those inserts which [sic] are not adequately padded or appropriately secured and can be easily dislodged. They could potentially injure the player wearing the product or another player.”

Cleva was infuriated by USL’s response and wrote Coyne the following: “To claim that the inserts can come loose is patently false. To claim that they become a danger to other players is ridiculous.”

He sent them an impact test from ICS Laboratories in Ohio, which he’d paid for, claiming it showed that not only did his headgear pose no threat to another player it actually reduced the force of two players knocking heads if one wore the Crasche Middie and the other girl didn’t. USL’s Coyne was not persuaded.

“Parents are looking for protective headgear. We understand that,” says Coyne. “But we as a governing body also have a responsibility to make sure that consumers are protected.”

Coyne told Cleva that US Lacrosse is working closely with ASTM International, a nonprofit organization based in Pennsylvania formerly known as the American Society for Testing and Materials, to create a women’s lacrosse headgear standard. She suggested his company become a member. Cleva says joining would cost only \$75, but he’s concerned that the terms of the membership could impinge on his patent rights. He is having his lawyer look into that issue before he signs up. Without a doubt, he insists, “My product will be the standard because it’s so effective.”

Now Cleva is waiting for an answer and he thinks girls lacrosse players are the ones losing because it hasn't been approved. Plus he's facing accusations that creating headgear for girls lacrosse will make the game more violent.

The girls' game is intended to be safer than the boys' game, says Stephanie Degennaro, who manages the Lacrosse Unlimited store in Miller Place. She played varsity lacrosse at Longwood High School in Brookhaven and at Stony Brook University. When she's not selling merchandise for "the fastest sport on two feet," she's coaching and refereeing girls' games.

"Basically women's lacrosse is supposed to be a non-contact sport," she says. "Everything is supposed to be finesse and controlled. ... Men's lacrosse is a contact sport like football."

Degennaro's store does not carry headgear for girls, but she has noticed players wearing "these headband things" and "those soft foam 'ugly' helmets" on the field.

"Approving headgear is going to make the girls' game more violent," she says. "To be completely honest, I wouldn't want to see the game go that way. Some of the girls out there wearing these helmets act as if they're invincible. I would only want to give [headgear] to girls who've had prior concussions."

– Bill Bradley, contributing editor

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