

# In Michigan, Sidelines Are Offices Of Neurologists

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ANN ARBOR, Mich. — Most neurologists conduct concussion assessments in the safe, beige-walled, soft-elevator-music confines of a medical office. Their patients are not usually fired up on adrenaline, a 100-piece band is not blaring in the background, and tens of thousands of very partisan fans are not standing and screaming during the exam.



Joel Kowsky for The New York Times

David Kaufman was at one home Michigan State game in 2010 and has seen his role grow from all home games in 2011 to every game since 2012.

But that is the juiced-up environment surrounding the neurologists Jeff Kutcher of Michigan and David Kaufman of [Michigan State](#) when they make the football sidelines their avant-garde offices on Saturdays.

Both doctors will be at Spartan Stadium on Saturday when the in-state rivals play each other. Most Big Ten squads have consulting neurological specialists, but only Michigan and Michigan State have a neurologist on the field for all home and away games.

“Being right there gives a number of advantages, the biggest being I can see what is going on virtually from the moment the injury happens,” said Kutcher, who is also the director of Michigan’s NeuroSport program. “It’s not easy being on the sidelines with everything going on. I’ve learned how to concentrate and tune all of that noise and emotion out — it’s not easy. I am there as a trained neurologist, not a Michigan fan, to evaluate and expertly interpret a brain in distress.”

He added, “What you see on the sidelines looks a lot different than what I would see in the office a few days later.”

Despite increased awareness about concussions, and the Big Ten’s own research project with the Ivy League, Michigan and Michigan State’s sideline neurological specialists are a rarity within the conference. Big Ten universities were surveyed in October, asking what neurological services, if any, were available at games.

Every football program except Penn State’s responded to the query. Indiana has a sideline neurological specialist for home games and, this season, some away games. Nebraska has one at home games, but not on the field.

The other Big Ten teams rely on athletic training staffs and team physicians to assess neurological issues during games.

Kutcher and Kaufman track plays during the game, looking for players who could be concussed. When a potential concussion occurs, the athletic trainers first attend to the player on the field. The neurologists come in, usually in tandem with the team physicians, for a sideline or locker-room assessment.

Athletic Directors Mark Hollis of Michigan State and Dave Brandon of Michigan said their decisions to have neurologists on the sidelines were made independently.

“We take the concussion issue really seriously, and we had no idea that Michigan was doing the same thing, so good for them, too,” Hollis said in a telephone interview. “On the field, we don’t like Michigan. Off the field, both of our training and medical staffs want the best for our student-athletes. We collaborate a lot, and the fact we’re both having neurologists on hand to care for them shows that.”

Kutcher started attending home games in a medical capacity in 2009. He added bowl-game duties in 2011 and has been to every game, home and away, since 2012.

Kaufman was at one home game in 2010 and has seen his role grow from all home games in 2011 to every game since 2012.

The neurologists also visit practices two or three days per week, checking on recovering players and observing drills. They said they get to know the players, see the effects of contact and establish familiarity to build doctor-patient trust.

“I have seen many types of concussions, mild traumatic brain injuries, in many individuals over the years, but you cannot match the wide spectrums you will get until you are on the front line,” Kaufman, the chairman of Michigan State’s department of neurology, said in a telephone interview. “From an academic perspective, witnessing these manifestations is extremely important to help myself, for research, and future clinicians that we are training here at Michigan State.”

Spartans Coach Mark Dantonio views having a neurologist on the sideline as an asset during recruiting, perhaps reassuring parents and potential players.

“Concussion treatment is a relatively new subject matter,” Dantonio said in an email. “It’s really taken off in the last year. It’s definitely something we will talk about in recruiting. We’ve always highlighted the services our medical staff and trainers provide.”

Both doctors maintain independence outside of their athletic departments, stressing their primary roles as professors and practicing neurologists. They said they were there solely for the neurological needs for athletes at Michigan and Michigan State, and not to make decisions to help teams win.

Both neurologists said they had never had any problems with coaches over their diagnoses.

“Whenever I spend time with coaches in our group meetings or discussions, I remind them that the athletic training staff and doctors do not report to you, they do not work for you, and they’re not going to listen to you,” Michigan’s Brandon said. “They are here for our health and safety of our student-athletes. Period.”

Brady Hoke, Michigan’s coach, said he respected Kutcher’s authority to medically remove players, usually by taking away their helmets after an assessment, if they could be concussed.

“He’s the expert,” Hoke said. “For me to say I think a kid is all right may be a mistake. As the spotlight on concussions has grown, no doubt he’s the one who has studied the effects, the trauma, the symptoms. That’s his bailiwick, his expertise.”

Hoke added: “I’ll defer to Jeff on concussions, and he won’t tell me how to coach the defensive line. We’ll be good.”

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

***Correction: October 30, 2013***

*An earlier version of this article incorrectly identified the doctors associated with Michigan and Michigan State. Jeffrey Kutcher is affiliated with Michigan, not Michigan State. David Kaufman is affiliated with Michigan State, not Michigan.*

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