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Sickle cell trait education improving, but there is still room for progress

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Pallbearers carry out the body of Olivier Louis after the funeral service at Grace Bible Church in Orlando on Sept. 25, 2010. Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda, Orlando Sentinel. (September 25, 2010)

By Iliana Limón | Orlando Sentinel
6:07 a.m. EDT, July 26, 2011

Olivier Louis told his family he was excited about finally getting a chance to prove himself on the football field.

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Sickle-cell trait

When carriers of sickle-cell trait are under extreme stress, their normally round, flexible red blood cells can become flat and rigid.

Normal red blood cells
Normal red blood cells flow freely in a blood vessel. They contain an iron-rich protein called hemoglobin that carries oxygen from the lungs to the rest of the body.



Timeline of important sickle cell trait dates

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Louis, an energetic 15-year-old, reported to Wekiva High School near Orlando for his fifth practice with the freshman team on Sept. 7, 2010. His family moved from Haiti in 2001 and it was Louis' first opportunity to play organized football. He often lifted weights with his older brothers, who said Louis was a promising athlete. He was projected to play linebacker or defensive end.

Louis collapsed and died at practice that day from complications of sickle cell trait and heat stress. His family did not know Louis had the trait, a condition that has been tied to sudden death in 17 athletes since 2000.

"It's so confusing because they told us he was perfectly healthy," said Ruth Louis, Olivier's sister. "... The medical examiner said that shouldn't have caused his death."

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"We don't have closure because we don't understand how this could have happened to him."

Eighteen months before Louis collapsed, UCF freshman wide receiver Ereck Plancher collapsed and died following an offseason workout held less than 30 miles from the Wekiva campus. A medical examiner determined Plancher died from complications of sickle cell trait. A jury recently ordered the UCF Athletics Association to pay Plancher's parents \$10 million in damages.

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- [See more videos »](#) Plancher's death generated major media attention in Louis' backyard, but it wasn't enough to save his life.

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While advocates for sickle cell trait education say great strides have been made during the past 10 years, they still see holes in the system. They are concerned athletes, parents, coaches and athletic trainers don't always receive critical information about proper precautions and treatment of athletes with the trait.

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Youth leagues and high schools

Sickle cell trait differs dramatically from **sickle cell anemia**, a debilitating disease that requires constant medical care. People with sickle cell trait often suffer no symptoms or health problems. However, under extreme stress, red **blood** cells can warp into a sickle shape, clog blood flow and quickly damage vital organs.

Sickle cell trait has been linked to the deaths of 17 athletes since 2000.

University of Oklahoma head athletic trainer Scott Anderson helped write the National Athletic Trainers

Association guidelines on sickle cell trait. He's heard of at least two cases of 12-year-olds participating in youth football who died from trait complications.

"If more pediatricians were having conversations with families about sickle cell trait, they would understand the risks and precautions," he said. "I think that would go a long way toward protecting young athletes."

The three major youth football leagues in the United States — Pop Warner, American Youth Football and USA Football — all work with sports medicine organizations to provide youth coaches with information about a variety of health issues, including sickle cell trait.

High schools are putting a greater emphasis on sickle cell trait education, as well. In Florida, questions have been added to the physical exam forms to help determine which athletes have the trait. And nationally, a push has been made to better educate high school athletic trainers.

There is some indication those efforts are starting to pay off. Orlando Freedom High coach Andy Johnson said one of the keys to his team's success is his close relationship with the school's athletic trainers.

Johnson said during typical Freedom varsity football workouts, two full-time athletic trainers and two student athletic trainers from UCF are on the field at all times.

He said he has a basic working understanding of sickle cell trait after being informed by an athletic trainer before the 2006 season one of his best players had the trait.

"They gave us a brief overview of what it was and what to watch out for," Johnson said of the athletic trainers' conversations with the coaching staff. "We never ended up having an issue with that player and nothing ever came of it."

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etat26 at 10:53 AM July 26, 2011

Leon Barnes - If anyone sounds racist it's YOU. And yes there is an easy fix to this Sickle Cell problem. Test all athletes for it and other things like diabetes before offering them a scholarship. If they come up positive, no scholarship. That easy. Bet you think college athletes should be also be paid to play college ball too. Sorry, but that's why they are getting a free ride that cost the rest of us thousands of dollars. If the athletes think that's unfair they can always refuse the scholarship. So stop bashing UCF or any other college/university.
 Besides this article is about Oliver Lewis, not Eric Plancher. Eric's family only sued for \$\$\$\$\$. Hope they don't get anything but a large attorney bill. The only thing Eric and Oliver had in common is they both came to the United States from Hati. Hati is one of the highest nations with AIDS so, for all I care, they can stay or go back to Hati.

Leon Barnes at 7:00 AM July 26, 2011

Eric Plancher, did not die from a drive by shooting, or from street violence, he was no drug dealer, he was no rolling sixty or a blood gangbanger, he did not die from a Drug Related crime, Eric died in the hand's of UCF Football Coache's who pushed him to the extreme, and denied him water, so they can get the best condition out of him! so they can fill their football stadium up with fans. Eric family sued UCF and won, but UCF was so stunned by the loss they refused to pay the Plancher's, why is no one at this Racist Regime UCF is being charged with murdering Eric?

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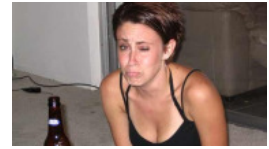
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