

**TESTIMONY OF PAUL SPARLING**  
**HEAD ATHLETIC TRAINER EMERITUS FOR THE CINCINNATI BENGALS**  
**BEFORE THE OHIO SENATE HEALTH COMMITTEE**

**Wednesday, December 6, 2023**

*For Submission*

Good morning. Chairman Huffman, Vice Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Antonio, and members of the Senate Health Committee:

My name is Paul Sparling. I am the recently retired Head Athletic Trainer and Director of Sports Medicine Administration for the Cincinnati Bengals. Today, I am testifying on behalf of the **Smart Heart Sports Coalition**. The coalition strongly supports House Bill (HB) 47, and we urge the committee, as well as the entire Senate, to pass this important bill as soon as possible.

I came to Ohio at the age of three when my father, a Lieutenant Colonel in the Air Force, was transferred to Wright Patterson Air Force Base in Fairborn. I am a product of the state of Ohio's school system, from elementary school to college.

I grew up in Fairborn, and then the Dayton suburb of Riverside, and attended Mad River Junior High School and Stebbins High School. During that time, I first developed and nurtured an interest in becoming an Athletic Trainer, which combined my love of competition and sports with a growing curiosity to prevent, evaluate, and treat sports injuries.

I graduated from Wilmington College in 1981 and was one of the first group of students to receive a Bachelor of Science in Athletic Training, which then was a new program at the college. One of the reasons I picked Wilmington College to go to school was that at that time, the Cincinnati Bengals held their training camp each summer on Wilmington's campus, and I had hoped to have the opportunity to meet Marv Pollins, who was then the Bengals Athletic Trainer.

I not only met Marv Pollins, but he took me under his wing, and my career aspirations took flight. While I started out working with the Bengals in 1979 as the "Training Camp Laundry Boy", I worked hard along the way, becoming the Bengals Athletic Trainer Student Intern, then Part-time Assistant Athletic Trainer, then Fulltime Assistant Athletic Trainer. In 1992, I was selected to succeed the retiring Marv Pollins, becoming the Bengals Head Athletic Trainer – a role that I had the privilege to serve in for 30 NFL seasons. Along the way, I helped to provide medical care, and treatment to hundreds of NFL players, during 845 NFL games, and thousands of practices and treatment sessions.

During my decades-long tenure with the Bengals, although always prepared, I was fortunate not to have witnessed or participated in an in-game event as dramatic, dire, and consequential as on January 2<sup>nd</sup>, when Buffalo Bills safety Damar Hamlin suffered a sudden cardiac arrest (SCA) on the field following a routine play. In a matter of seconds, it became apparent that this was not a routine scenario. This was something that had never been witnessed during a nationally televised NFL football game in history.

The fans at Paycor Stadium fell silent, as did players and coaches on the field. As alarm and uncertainty gripped the stadium, some stood motionless or bowed their heads. Others shed a tear. I think everyone – in this state, across our country, and throughout the sports world – held their collective breath, and said a prayer.

Those of us on the athletic training and medical staffs of both teams swung into action. As we had trained and rehearsed so many times in the past, we implemented our stadium's Emergency Action Plan (EAP), which detailed the crucial steps to take immediately following a medical emergency. After the initial on-field evaluation, a Bills' Assistant Athletic Trainer started to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR). Within moments, the on-field paramedics had retrieved an automated external defibrillator (AED), applying it to Damar's chest and used it to restart his heart. After stabilizing Damar's condition on the field, he was transported by ambulance to the University of Cincinnati Medical Center, a Level One trauma center. There, he was able to continue to receive state-of-the-art medical care, and as a result, a second chance at life.

The episode illustrated a stark reality – a cardiac arrest can happen anywhere, and to anyone, even the most well-trained and elite athletes. And, when such a catastrophic, cardiac event occurs, the readiness and response of those at or near the scene can make the difference between who survives and who does not.

Following the life-saving response to Damar's injury and his inspirational recovery, the *National Football League* led the launch of the **Smart Heart Sports Coalition** in March. The coalition includes major sports leagues and organizations, as well as leading patient and health advocacy groups across the country, nearly 40 allies and stakeholders in all – many of which are also testifying today.

We have come together to advance a simple, but central goal: to save lives. We want Ohio and every state across the country to have in place the three evidence-based policies that reflect the basic, foundational elements of the response that saved Damar's life, and, that if adopted, will save the lives of school-aged athletes and others who may one day experience SCA.

Here are the policies:

1. An athletic EAP that is venue specific, widely distributed, posted, rehearsed, and updated annually.
2. Clearly marked AEDs at each venue or within 1-3 minutes of each venue where high school practices and competitions are held.
3. CPR education, including AED training, for coaches.

Adopting these policies is critical, especially given that SCA is the leading cause of sudden death among young athletes. According to estimates, as many as 23,000 children experience cardiac arrests outside of a hospital each year; 4 in 10 of those happen when they are playing a sport or engaged in physical activity. Research shows that survival rates can double or even triple, when people take action, by immediately calling 9-1-1, starting CPR, and using an available AED, rather than simply waiting for emergency responders to arrive on the scene.

HB 47 does that. It will save lives. Specifically, the legislation requires that AEDs be readily accessible at each public and chartered school athletic grounds, as well as each municipal and recreational location, where organized sporting events occur. It also requires EAPs to be adopted at these sites and for staff to be trained in using AEDs, which compliments Ohio's existing requirement that coaches be certified in CPR. If passed, Ohio will have in place all three policies that the **Smart Heart Sports Coalition** promotes.

This legislation will make the places where young people play and compete safer, more resilient, and better prepared to respond to a cardiac emergency. On behalf of all the organizations that are members of the Smart Heart Sports Coalition, as well as all the professional sports teams across this state – including the Cincinnati Bengals, Cleveland Browns, Columbus Blue Jackets, Cincinnati Reds, Cleveland Cavaliers, Columbus Crew, FC Cincinnati, and Cleveland Guardians – I urge you to approve HB 47. That will represent a big victory for the youth throughout our state.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

Smart Heart Sports Coalition Members

Association of Black Cardiologists  
American College of Cardiologists  
American College of Sports Medicine  
American Heart Association  
American Medical Society for Sports Medicine  
American Orthopedic Society for Sports Medicine  
American Red Cross  
Chasing M's Foundation  
Citizen CPR Foundation  
Heart Rhythm Society  
John Taylor Babbitt Foundation  
Korey Stringer Institute  
Major League Baseball  
Major League Soccer  
Make Them Know Your Name Foundation  
National Athletic Trainers' Association  
National Association of Emergency Medical Technicians  
National Basketball Association  
National Collegiate Athletic Association  
National Council of Youth Sports  
National Federation of State High School Associations  
National Football League  
National Football League Physicians Society  
National Hockey League  
National Women's Soccer League  
Parent Heart Watch  
Pediatric and Congenital Electrophysiology Society

Simon's Heart

Sport Safety International

Starting Hearts

Sudden Cardiac Arrest Foundation

T.J. Carrie Foundation

United States Tennis Association

Weil Institute (The Max Harry Weil Institute for Critical Care Research)

Who We Play For

Women's National Basketball Association

Women's Tennis Association