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Eastchester staff revives referee on court

by Kevin Devaney Jr. on Fri, Feb 8, 2013 at 6:14 PM / Updated Sat, Feb 9, 2013 at 9:40 PM

Eastchester Athletic Director Jason Karol was standing along the baseline near his office, watching the Eastchester and Edgemont girls basketball teams play a tense overtime game on Friday night, when he spotted the referee out of the corner of his eye violently hit the floor.

When Karol ran over, he immediately realized the man was bleeding from the back of his head and that he wasn't breathing.

Neil Berniker, a longtime Section 1 boys and girls basketball referee, suffered a heart failure in the middle of play.

And had it not been for the quick-reacting of Karol, certified Athletic Trainer Ellen Bastoni and a parent in the stands, Berniker likely would not have survived.

"As soon as I ran over, I saw he wasn't breathing and I yelled to call 911," Karol said. "I told the trainer to get the AED because he was gasping for air but he wasn't breathing."

Berniker, a teacher and coach at Horace Mann in the Bronx, was resting in the Intensive Care Unit at Lawrence Hospital on Friday. He could not be reached for comment.

Karol, 29, has been trained in CPR since his days as a teenage lifeguard. A 2001 Westlake graduate and first-year Athletic Director, Karol administered chest compressions and mouth-to-mouth until Bastoni returned with the AED (Automated External Defibrillator).

"We connected him to the AED and it said to shock him," Karol said.

With over 200 people watching in the stands, Karol, Bastoni and a parent from the stands resumed administering CPR when Berniker was revived.

"We saw his eyes open and he started breathing again," Karol said. "He was confused and I just held his hand until the EMT's got there. He didn't know what happened."

Berniker was given oxygen in the gym and immediately taken to Lawrence Hospital where he spent the night. As of Friday afternoon, Berniker was awake and "walking around and making jokes" according to Karol, who spoke with a family member.

"It's just so amazing because it was Senior Night," Karol said. "I had my back to the bleachers but you could hear a pin drop in the gym it was so silent."

The Eastchester and Edgemont players were taken off the court almost immediately after Berniker's collapse. The Eastchester players, many of which were shaken according to Karol, spoke with a counselor at school on Friday morning.

Karol said he'd never administered CPR on a human before, just the training mannequin. He, as well as many members of the Eastchester High School physical education staff, are licensed CPR instructors and Karol estimates he teaches over 200 kids and adults per year.

"It was such a great game and a crazy fourth quarter," Karol said. "You think to yourself, what if the game didn't go to overtime? This may have happened as he was driving home."

Karol spent most of Friday fielding phone calls, texts and emails from people commending his

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response in the emergency.

"It didn't really hit me until I got in the car after the game what had happened," Karol said. "I couldn't sleep at all last night. I just kept thinking about it. I'm a little shaken. I was just so relieved when I heard today that he was alright."

CHECK BACK soon for more on this developing story

Email Kevin Devaney Jr. at kdevaney@cablevision.com

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