

TAKING THE VIOLENCE OUT OF HOCKEY

Introduction



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Focus

The age-old debate over violence in hockey surfaced again in the winter of 2010. While the National Hockey League implemented stricter rules regarding blindside hits to the head, many wondered if enough was being done to take the violence out of hockey.

In the men's gold medal hockey game at the Vancouver Olympics, Canadian goaltender Roberto Luongo made a tricky save in overtime, prompting his teammates to surge up ice on the counter-attack against the United States. Sidney Crosby, silenced for most of the game, tried to split the defence as the puck trickled into the corner. Undeterred, Crosby made chase and poked the puck to teammate Jerome Iginla. With a U.S. defenceman draped all over him, Iginla passed the puck back to an open Crosby who snapped it past U.S. goalie Ryan Miller. In one of the best hockey games in Olympic history, Canada won 3-2 in overtime as the nation breathed a collective sigh of relief before giving way to unprecedented celebration.

The Vancouver Olympics gold medal game was an example of hockey at its finest. The game displayed skillful passing, shooting, and scoring. It also featured great body checking and goaltending. It had drama and tension—and eventually triumph as Canada won the game in overtime. Just a few days before the men's contest, the Canadian women's hockey team dominated their U.S. opponents with similar skill and competence. In what many have called "Canada's Golden Games" the twin

hockey triumphs were the icing on the metaphorical cake.

However, the celebrations were short-lived. Once the National Hockey League (NHL) got back into action, violence in hockey took centre stage. Within weeks of the Vancouver Games, NHL officials were forced to contend with the issue of crushing and debilitating hits to the head that knocked several players out of commission. The NHL scrambled to respond to what was turning into a public relations nightmare. NHL players had been calling for a crackdown on hits to the head since the previous season. Now with the number of head-shot injuries mounting, the NHL needed to do something. Eventually, the NHL fast-tracked a rule to prevent further injuries that banned blindside hits that target the head of an opponent.

With minor league hockey players watching and mimicking every move of professional players, the NHL needs to make sure it's setting the right example. In essence, the NHL has a decision to make: does it want to promote the kind of hockey that made the Vancouver Olympics so successful or does it want to promote a game where "playing tough" will continue to knock players out of the game?

To Consider

1. Did you watch the Vancouver Olympics men's gold medal hockey game? If you did, describe how you felt when Crosby scored the winning goal in overtime.
2. If you are not a hockey fan, describe what it is that you don't like about the game. Do you find it boring? Is the game too violent? What sport(s) do you like to play or watch?
3. The Canadian women's hockey team won gold in Vancouver a few days before the men. Their brand of hockey, while physical, does not allow body checking. In your opinion, is body checking a necessary part of the game of hockey?

TAKING THE VIOLENCE OUT OF HOCKEY

Video Review

Pre-viewing Activity

Two incidents rocked the minor hockey world in the 2009-2010 season. In November 2009, Erie Otters forward Mike Liambas hit Kitchener Rangers defenceman Ben Fanelli into the end glass with such force that Fanelli was left with a cracked skull and broken bones in his face. The hit earned Liambas a lifetime ban from the Ontario Hockey League and knocked Fanelli out of action for the season.

Then, on January 17, 2010, Patrice Cormier of the Rouyn-Noranda Huskies flattened Quebec Rempart Mikael Tam with a vicious elbow to the head. While an unconscious Tam convulsed on the ice, Cormier argued with the referees, presumably about their decision to eject him from the game. Cormier was suspended for the rest of the season, including the playoffs, while Tam was rushed to the hospital with a massive concussion that left him out of action for several weeks.

These types of incidents give hockey a bad name. In your opinion, what penalties should be imposed on players who injure their opponents through reckless body checks, stick infractions, or in fights?

Viewing Questions

As you watch the video, respond to the questions in the spaces provided.

1. Why does Jim Hynes refer to Jacques Plante as the "champion of the mask"?

2. What does hockey author Kevin Huhn fear will result when parents see the video of the bench-clearing brawl involving eight-year-old kids?

3. Who was Don Sanderson? What happened to him?

4. a) What is the penalty for fighting in the league Sanderson played in?

- b) Why did questions regarding lax attitudes toward helmets arise after Sanderson's death? Do you think these questions are fair?

5. According to Sanderson's father, what was his son's goal with regard to fighting the season that he died?

6. Why do concussion experts think hockey fights need to be banned? What other infractions do they think need to be eliminated from the game?

7. How does the NHL respond to the call by some to ban fighting in hockey?

8. a) What happened to a Quebec junior hockey player that sent shockwaves through the hockey world?

b) As a result, a player was criminally convicted of assault with a weapon. What did the player's lawyer try to argue in his defence?

9. a) Describe the incident that ended Aaron Moser's hockey career.

b) What injuries did he suffer as a result of the hit?

10. What three things does Moser think work together to make hockey so potentially deadly?

11. What penalties does Moser think could be imposed to deter players from violently taking someone out of the game?

Post-viewing Activity

1. Aaron Moser holds no ill will toward the player who hit him. He says that the hit was part of the game. What do you think? Are hits like the one Moser suffered part of the game? Should they be? Explain.

2. When you become a parent would you be reluctant to let your child play hockey? Why?

TAKING THE VIOLENCE OUT OF HOCKEY

The Problem

Has hockey become more violent in the past few years or does it just seem that way? Well it probably just seems that way. In the 1970s, intimidation was the theme of the day, with teams like the Philadelphia Flyers fighting their way to the Stanley Cup. The goal of the Flyers was to either beat their opponents into submission or make them afraid to play against them. For a brief period, the so-called Broadstreet Bullies ruled the NHL, bringing the Stanley Cup to Philadelphia in 1974 and 1975. However, the rule of the fist was followed by the reign of finesse as the highly skilled Montreal Canadiens won the next four Stanley Cups. The lesson: violent hockey tactics sometimes prevail, but pure hockey skill—the pass, the shot, the check—will always win out in the long run.

Nonetheless, hockey violence has reared its ugly head again, this time in the form of hits from behind and blindside hits to the head. While these types of hits have always been a problem, why does it seem to be such a big problem in today's game? Here are a few reasons:

1. The game is faster.

After the NHL lockout of 2004-2005, the league and its players agreed to a number of rule changes in an effort to speed up play and improve scoring chances. Many of these rules had already been implemented with great success at the minor-league level.

First, the NHL eliminated the two-line pass, opening up the neutral zone for faster offensive play. Next, they cracked down on obstruction infractions by strictly enforcing rules dealing with holding, hooking, and tripping as well as stick infractions like slashing, cross

checking, and high sticking. The result was a much more intense and fast-paced game.

The faster pace has meant more high-speed collisions—some clean and some dirty—and subsequently more serious injuries. While there might not have been a need for a “hitting from behind” or “blindside hit to the head” rule in the slower, pre-lockout era, there is certainly a need for those kinds of rules in today's game.

2. The players are stronger.

The physical conditioning that today's players pursue is truly remarkable. Fitness is emphasized as soon as players start playing the game. Weight training and cardio-vascular exercise are standard practices if players hope to compete at the top level. Put simply: players are bigger and stronger than at any other time in hockey history. When they throw their bodies around they can inflict some serious damage—whether they are playing in a bantam AA game or the NHL.

3. The equipment is as hard as rock.

Don Cherry has consistently used his “Coach's Corner” to criticize equipment changes that he feels have led to player injuries. Shoulder and elbow pads that used to be made of soft padding are now made of hard plastic. They amount to a durable form of body armour designed to protect today's players. However, when a player hits an opponent in a vulnerable area, like the head, the results can be devastating. The old soft padding used to allow players to absorb hits; the new harder padding sends a shudder through an opponent. Some efforts have been made to bring back some of the padding in shoulder and elbow pads because of these concerns.

4. Hockey is a violent sport.

Hockey, like football, is a violent game. Players are encouraged to deliver fierce body checks on one another in an effort to win possession of the puck. Team toughness is held in high esteem. No team wants to be manhandled by an opponent, and many will use retribution and intimidation to get back at someone they feel has challenged their team's toughness. Players are even allowed to fight one another, receiving only a five-minute penalty at the professional level. No other professional sport has such lax rules when it comes to fighting.

While some rule changes have been made to make the game safer, these changes did not come without opposition. During the debate dealing with blindside hits to the head in the

winter of 2010, Mike Milbury used his segment on *Hockey Night in Canada* to lament the "pansification" of hockey. You won't find "pansification" in the dictionary; Milbury used the term to make the point that the game was losing its toughness. Essentially, Milbury's comment reflects the old-time hockey attitude made famous by Conn Smythe when he said "if you can't beat them in the alley, you can't beat them on the ice" (*Toronto Star*, January 10, 2009).

However, some hockey insiders, and many watching from the outside, wonder if hockey has an attitude problem. Instead of promoting an endless cycle of retribution and violence, maybe the game should promote skill-based play that allows players to make their point on the score sheet and not in the penalty box.

Follow-up

Review the four explanations for hockey violence and fill in the following chart:

| Explanation | Summary | Your position. State your thoughts or feelings regarding what has been written. |
|----------------------------------|---------|---|
| The game is faster. | | |
| The players are stronger. | | |
| The equipment is hard as a rock. | | |
| Hockey is a violent sport. | | |

TAKING THE VIOLENCE OUT OF HOCKEY

The Solution

Further Research

To see the Hockey Canada public service announcements go to www.hockeycanada.ca and click on Media Gallery.

Did you know . . .

Football helmets are the same basic design for all levels of the game, while hockey helmets move from a full face shield in minor hockey, to a half visor in junior, to the option of no visor as a professional.

There is no consensus about how to “solve” the problem of hockey violence but there are plenty of creative ideas being put forward by a variety of people with a vested interest in the game. Here are a few of them.

Encourage Fun and Fair Play

Hockey is a game of skill and integrity. Stakeholders at all levels—from players to coaches to parents—are responsible for fostering an atmosphere where skills can develop naturally. It is also important that hockey insiders challenge behaviour that jeopardizes the integrity of the game.

When Hockey Canada noticed a problem with parents putting too much pressure on their hockey-playing kids, they created a series of public service announcements (PSAs) designed to wake parents up. One PSA shows a parent berating a child who isn’t playing hide-n-seek with enough skill. Another shows an indignant child saying to her mother, “You’re gonna let her get away with that!” after a fellow shopper accidentally bumps into their grocery cart. Both PSAs are designed to remind parents and kids that hockey is just a game—and it’s supposed to be fun.

There is a growing trend in minor hockey to not only educate young players about fair play but to also reward players for it. The Fair Play System is a scheme piloted in some North American minor hockey leagues that rewards players and teams with lower penalty minutes while punishing players and teams with higher penalty minutes. Advocates claim that the system results in much cleaner play and a dramatic decrease in the number of player injuries. With hockey’s emphasis on “doing anything for the team” a player might

think twice about throwing an elbow into an opponent’s jaw if he knows that he might be hurting his team.

Punish Disrespectful Play

Players at the professional and minor league levels have been noting a blatant lack of respect within the game. Some players seem to go out of their way to attack and antagonize their opponents. Some players are just downright mean. If hockey hopes to curtail the embarrassing moments that make the sport look like a game for goons, they need to introduce more stringent penalties against those who bring dishonour to the sport.

Wear Good Helmets Properly

New equipment designs over the past few years have served to protect players from injury. Almost every player is wearing shoulder, elbow, and shin pads properly. Helmets are another story. Hockey helmets vary in design and effectiveness, with many players wearing them too loosely. Too often a player’s helmet will pop off in a collision with another player. In international junior hockey, any player whose helmet comes off must leave the ice.

One new development in helmet technology came recently when Mark Messier teamed up with an equipment developer named Cascade to produce the M11 helmet. The M11 is designed to absorb the impact of a hit—like a car’s shock absorbers curtails the feeling of the bumps on the road—with the hope of decreasing the number of concussions suffered by players. Sports doctors have also promoted the use of mouth guards by players with the same goal of keeping the head steady and decreasing concussions.

Did you know . . .

According to the British Columbia Injury Research and Prevention Unit, players are four times more likely to be injured in contact hockey, and over 40 per cent of player injuries come as a result of body checks.

Limit Body Checking

The question of when body checking should be introduced to the game is the subject of intense debate. Most members of the medical community feel that body checking should not be a part of hockey until players are at least 13 years old. If a player shows the ability to play at an elite level, then the skill can be taught to them at this age. Otherwise, non-contact is the way to go for the overwhelming majority of the over half million Canadian kids playing the game.

Eliminate Fighting

Many people who love hockey, love hockey fights. However, if one is looking at making the game safer, fighting needs to be curtailed or eliminated. The death

of Don Sanderson, a senior league player for the Whitby Dunlops, should serve as an example of the dangerous nature of fighting.

Junior hockey is trying to lead the charge in dealing with fighting. The Quebec Major Junior Hockey League has implemented rule changes that have seen the number of fights per game drop from three in the 1990s to one in today's game. Many Canadian Hockey League affiliates have already banned the removal of the helmet or other equipment during fights. Meanwhile, despite a trend away from fighting in the minors, the NHL stubbornly clings to the practice and refuses to find ways to deter players from fighting.

Analysis

1. What is the Fair Play System? Do you think this type of system would improve the game of hockey?
2. Some people think that if a player injures an opponent with a cheap shot or dirty hit the player has to sit out for at least as long as it takes for their victim to recover from their injury. Do you agree with this idea? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach?
3. In women's hockey, body checking is illegal and subject to a two-minute minor penalty for those who engage in the practice. Do you think this is a good idea? Should the no-body-checking rule be implemented for all of hockey?
4. Should fighting be banned from the game of hockey? Explain your position.

TAKING THE VIOLENCE OUT OF HOCKEY

Concussions

Further Research

For more information on concussions suffered in sports, go to neurosurgeon Charles Tator's Think First Web site at www.thinkfirst.ca.

Since the NHL lockout of 2004-2005, league officials have been alarmed by the growing number of concussions across the league. Minor hockey leagues are reporting pretty much the same thing. A British Columbia study found that 60 per cent of minor hockey players between the ages of 15 and 20 have suffered at least one concussion ("Ice Hockey Injuries: Fact Sheet," B.C. Injury Research and Prevention Unit, www.injuryresearch.bc.ca).

But has there actually been an increase in concussions? Many hockey insiders argue that there has not been an increase, but rather, that people are just more aware of concussions and their symptoms. Fifteen years ago, when a player got hit hard and left the game in a daze, coaches and players would say he just had his "bell rung." He would sniff some smelling salts, shake it off, and get back in the game. Today, coaches and players know that hard hits, particularly to the head, that leave a player off balance may be a sign of a concussion. In these cases, players are removed from the game or practice and sent to a doctor.

A concussion is a trauma that a person suffers when their brain is whipped against their own skull. Doctors refer to concussions as a mild traumatic brain injury. Some experts liken it to what happens to an egg when you shake it quickly from left to right. The yoke will move from its stable position in the centre and slam against one side

of the hard shell before bouncing back and hitting the other side. In sports like hockey, concussions are a common injury. Symptoms include headaches, neck pain, nausea, dizziness, blurred vision, and confusion. A player who suffers a concussion may or may not lose consciousness in the incident. It is also important to note that the onset of some symptoms may be delayed by up to a day.

Depending on the severity of the trauma, most people are able to recover from their first concussion. However, they are more susceptible to subsequent concussions, and the more concussions a person suffers, the more likely they are to experience dementia and other neurological issues later in life. Former NHL journeyman enforcer Reggie Miller donated his post-mortem brain to science. Miller played for six teams in the 1960s. After his death in 2009, researchers at the Boston University School of Medicine found that Miller had suffered up to 20 concussions over the course of his life. Miller's son Chris revealed that his father suffered from dementia and was often irrational and irritable—signs of damage done by multiple concussions (*The Globe and Mail*, December 17, 2009).

Many hockey players have seen their careers cut short by concussions. Perhaps the recent spike in concussions at the minor league and professional level will lead to stricter enforcement of infractions that target a player's head.

Activity

Go to Hockey Canada's Web site (www.hockeycanada.ca) and, using their search tool, find the Concussion Awareness page. Click on the Hockey Canada Concussion Card. Read the information provided and provide a point-form outline of concussion symptoms, how to respond to a concussion, and the steps to be followed before a player returns to action.

TAKING THE VIOLENCE OUT OF HOCKEY

Activity: Write an Editorial

An editorial is a piece of writing that tries to persuade a reader to agree with the writer's position. The writer might be composing the piece to represent her/his position or the position of a group of like-minded individuals. The following two editorials present different opinions on an incident that happened in a game between the Boston Bruins and Pittsburgh Penguins on March 7, 2010. Bruins forward Marc Savard had just released a shot on goal when Penguin Matt Cooke came from his blind side and shouldered him in the head. No penalty was called on the play, and the league did not suspend Cooke.

You might want to watch the hit on YouTube before reading these editorials. Enter the search string "matt cooke hits marc savard."

Opinion 1: Show Some Respect — Crack Down on Cheap Shots

The NHL has always known that what kids see on television at the professional level will make its way into minor hockey games relatively quickly. This year the league has contended with a shameful display of cheap shots: namely blindside hits to the head and hits from behind.

If a kid sees a star like Boston's Marc Savard knocked out of the game by a technically clean hit by Pittsburgh's Matt Cooke, they are going to think blindside hits to the head are okay in their league. Sure the rules are stricter in minor league play, but on some level, kids are going to buy into the hooligan mentality that some proponents of hockey violence maintain.

That mentality tends to blame the victim, using rationalizations like: "What was Savard thinking when he skated into open ice with his head down? He had it coming to him for not protecting himself." In reality, Savard put himself into a vulnerable position by trying to make an offensive play to help his team. If Cooke wanted the puck he could have either poked it free or delivered a legitimate hit to separate Savard from the puck. The fact that Cooke felt the need to throw a shoulder into Savard's head shows that he was either too far out of position to make a fair play or he was simply head-hunting.

There is no way the NHL should be tolerating this kind of behaviour for the simple reason that kids are watching. In the same way one young player will mimic the offensive efforts of Sidney Crosby, another player will follow the reckless example of Matt Cooke. If the players aren't willing to show each other a modicum of respect, the league needs to step in and make them show some respect.

Opinion 2: What's Next? No Body checking?

No one likes to see a player go down to injury as a result of a body check but the fact of the matter is that Matt Cooke's hit on Marc Savard was clean. The referees did not call a penalty, and the league did not discipline Cooke for the hit. Hockey has a tradition of settling the score within the game.

It's called "The Code," and Cooke got a taste of NHL justice when he stepped on the ice against the Bruins a few weeks after the Savard incident. On his first shift, just two minutes into the game, Cooke dropped the gloves with Shawn Thornton and a brief fight took place. Cooke took his lumps and the issue was put to rest.

Fighting and checking are the tools of the player justice system. While Cooke's hit was unfortunate, the players were the one's to settle the score, not league bureaucrats.

However, now that everyone is wound up regarding so-called head-hunters, rule changes are going to be introduced that will make the game less tough. Mike Milbury's right: it's the "pansification" of the game. Hockey is a great game because it combines skill with toughness. In other words, you have to be both skilled and tough if you want to make it to the top level. If you take the toughness out of the game, you are eliminating half of the equation.

Your Turn

Write an editorial of your own. Remember, a good editorial states a clear opinion and attempts to persuade a reader to agree with your position. Your editorial should be 200 to 500 words long.

Here are a few topics to choose from:

- Fighting has no place in hockey—either at the minor or professional level. Hockey should have learned this when the Whitby Dunlops Don Sanderson was killed as a result of a hockey fight. Sanderson's helmet came off and his head hit the ice as he fell during the fight. You would think hockey insiders would have learned from this and banned fighting.
- If you take fighting out of hockey, stick infractions and other cheap shots are going to rise to the point of ruining the game. You think violence in hockey is bad now? Imagine a brand of the game where players decide things with their sticks instead of their fists.
- There is no need for body checking in the game of hockey. Women's hockey doesn't allow it, and the result is a smooth flowing, natural game where teams win based on skill, not intimidation.
- The intention of the body check is to separate a player from the puck. It is a vital part of the game. Minor and professional leagues don't need to eliminate body checking, they just need to go after players who hit with the intention of injuring their opponents.
- Many teams at the minor and professional level have an enforcer or two in their line-up. The enforcer is there to police the behaviour of players who are thinking of running down star players on the enforcer's team. The enforcer is needed to deliver the message, "Hands off, or else."
- Hockey, at all levels, continues to promote players whose only role is to intimidate their opponents. This has got to stop. If we want to see cheap shots eliminated from the game, "enforcers" need to be phased out of hockey in a hurry.