

Jack Todd: Hockey Canada makes the right decision

By Jack Todd, Special to the Gazette May 26, 2013



Hockey Canada's board of directors voted to eliminate bodychecking at the peewee level over the weekend.

MONTREAL — So Hockey Canada finally came through.

After a cross-country debate, the board of directors voted to eliminate bodychecking at the peewee level (which means, in most cases, 11- and 12-year-old boys.)

It's a good start.

The next step is to bring in the same ban at the bantam level because the simple truth is that there is no good reason for youngsters to risk the nightmare of concussion until they reach the point where they are competing seriously for spots on midget-A and junior-A teams.

The reason for the ban is as obvious as a kid missing a year of school while he sits in a darkened room, unable to do homework, watch television or even listen to the radio: Federations in Alberta, Quebec and Nova Scotia had already banned hitting for peewee players and a Hockey Alberta study indicated that eliminating the bodycheck at the peewee level in that province alone would prevent 400 concussions and more than 1,000 injuries per year.

Predictably, Don Cherry said that Hockey Canada will be sorry. Not for the first time, Cherry is wrong. Like so many in hockey, Cherry thinks in terms of the tiny minority of players who make it to the pros.

Until now, the rules for 99.9 per cent of the kids playing minor hockey have been set for the benefit of the .1 per cent who have a small chance of making it as far as junior A. So the kid who is just out there to have a little fun and is still having trouble skating backwards risks his health for the bruiser who might someday get a cup of coffee at an NHL training camp.

That was perhaps acceptable before we knew what we know now about concussions. In light of that knowledge (*and the catastrophic drop in hockey enrolment at the minor level, with 8,000 fewer kids signing up this season than last nationwide*) Hockey Canada had to act.

Don't ask me how they make this leap — but the troglodytes out there somehow make this a test of personal toughness: "I'm 50 pounds overweight, I haven't played a contact sport in 35 years — but I think kids should play full-contact hockey and you're a wimp if you don't agree with me."

Try to talk to these people, to convince them that having kids hit each other yields no beneficial result and that it's driving significant numbers of Canadian youngsters away from the sport — and they question your manhood.

If you're opposed to hitting in minor hockey, you're a wimp. Like Jim Peplinski. In these parts, Peplinski is best known as the co-captain (with Lanny McDonald) of the 1989 Calgary Flames team that broke a lot of Montreal hearts in a six-game Stanley Cup final. Yet Peplinski has gone much farther than Hockey Canada went Saturday: He has called for a [nationwide ban on bodychecking until at least age 16](#) to cut down on the concussion rates.

Peplinski played 711 games in the NHL and scored 161 goals — but the noteworthy stat is that he picked up 1,467 penalty minutes. A typical tree-hugging wimp, in other words. During a sport concussions seminar at the University of Calgary a few weeks ago, Peplinski said he's not optimistic about the future of Canada's national passion unless we take drastic steps to cut down on concussion rates.



“On this path,” he said, “I think we’re going to become dinosaurs.”

If you take time to look at the research, it's not hard to see why. In 80 per cent of concussion cases, the symptoms usually resolve in seven to 10 days. But for some patients, the ill effects can last for weeks, months or even years. And even one concussion makes you more vulnerable to the next, and the one after that.

Trouble is, every parent with a kid who once scored a goal in a mosquito game thinks that kid is destined for the NHL. They're dazzled by the money and the fame and they lose all perspective.

It's easy to be tough with someone else's brain and there are all too many people in this country who do just that — beginning with Cherry, who has been getting rich off other people's hockey fights for decades.

That doesn't make it right. The first priority in minor hockey is to protect the safety of the children who play. The kids aren't going to protect themselves because at that age, they all think they're immortal. The NHL? For the tiny minority of players who have a legitimate shot, the NHL can wait. There will always time to learn to hit.

Unless you're 12 years old, and a premature hit rings down a curtain of darkness on your world.