VIOLENCE IN HOCKEY

Jennifer Carter
PSE 4U1
Ms. Norman
01.03.05
Hockey violence is presently increasing in all levels. This sport has not always been violent; in truth, hockey originally held minimal, if any, body contact during a game. So where did this violent phenomenon come from? Perhaps its beginnings can be linked to the hockey association’s decision that permitted body contact starting at the atom level, where ten-year-old children play. This resulted in the previously important priorities – skating, shooting, and passing – to change. Aggressiveness and toughness were now the defining qualities that would qualify a child for a rep team because coaches wanted players that could hit. Parental violence, too, began increasing with more and more parents being removed from arena stands and having physical fights. As well, the National Hockey League (NHL) began recruiting players that would soon be known as enforcers. These enforcers have caused many injuries to a variety of players making the NHL dangerous. All of this has contributed to a dramatic shift in how youth hockey is played and viewed. The children especially have developed new reasons for playing hockey; they no longer go out for the simple pleasure of a game well played. Instead, they go out and hit as many people as they can, as hard as they can. Accordingly, the children’s idolization to their coaches, parents, and the NHL players has increased the amount of violent behaviour in youth hockey.

A major concern of all coaches in hockey is motivating players to be continually aggressive on the ice. “Aggressive hockey is demanded [of] all professional hockey players; minor and junior teams require no less of their players” (Vaz 92). If young hockey players are expected to be as aggressive as professionals, they are going to be encouraged to act in this way well young, thereby increasing violence in the minor levels. “Coaches stress hitting all the way up. But I, [a Midget all-star player], do not think there
should be really that much stress on it among the [younger players]” (Vaz 95). Having the young hockey players hitting creates more violence because they are unable to control the amount of force in their hits. A common speech that a coach tells his team is to “get out there and get rough and tough” (Vaz 96), which really means, “[to] go out there and more or less hit every guy [you] can, …every guy that comes down your wing. You’ve got to be able to take him out, and get tough means to start hitting and don’t take anything from anyone…” (Vaz 96). A team should not be told this, it is unnecessary to hit every player in sight; this is how injuries and fights start. “Restraint and caution in confronting the opposition or battling for the puck are not respected values at any level of organized hockey” (Vaz 92). If these are not respected values, then players just entering the levels of physical contact will misinterpret the purpose of hitting; therefore, they become aggressive because they were not instructed how to properly use this skill. It takes time to become comfortable with the aggressiveness and when children are pushed too hard, injuries occur.

When a junior A player was asked if he is “expected to play more aggressively?” He replied, “oh yeah, … Finally [the coach] said if I didn’t get aggressive and get in the corners and everything I wouldn’t be playing.” (Vaz 96)

In this situation, the coach should have helped him to creatively use physical contact to the advantage of a situation, instead of telling him he would be benched; coaches are there to help the players learn. “Players must be continually motivated to ‘put out’ for the team. Failure to conform to these expectations sometimes results in a player’s being benched or ‘sent down’ to a lower team” (Vaz 92). In most cases, players are not demoted to lower teams because they are not hitting. Furthermore, the humiliation a player endures when benched leads to aggressive and silly hits in order to not let this reoccur. Coaches should not be more concerned “with perfecting skills that are essential
for winning games than with inculcating general qualities” (Vaz 92). Stated differently, coaches should encourage the improvement of the basic skills, rather than emphasize a secondary component of hitting. The levels of physical violence in hockey may decrease if coaches focus encouragement on all aspects of hockey rather than simply the aggressive part.

Coaches’ high expectations for players to be tough in all levels of hockey are best shown through the amount of body contact and fighting. It has been said that “an essential component of toughness is the capacity both to endure sustained physical punishment and ‘to hand it out’” (Vaz 97). In other words, players only need toughness to cause physical harm. When a ten-year-old defenseman was asked if all teams required at least one tough player, he responded: “Yes. Because if you’ve got big guys coming down [at you] you got to like, knock them flat” (Vaz 100). This comment illustrates the problem at hand; ten-year-old hockey players should not believe they need to knock players flat at their level; conversely, they need to be taught the methods to take the man out strategically by pinning him along the boards. The expectation of rough and tough hockey in the minor leagues is evident in the following remarks:

“As long as they’re playing hockey, there’s nothing wrong with playing it rough, and that’s the way kids should be taught…That’s the game… If you want to play the game, play it tough, don’t play it like a sissy…. [They have] to be able to take it…and then go out and play. They can’t be babies. They have to be able to take it.” (Vaz 98-99)

Minor league coaches should never be allowed to name-call, the players internalize this idea and then it becomes visible out on the ice through verbal and physical aggression. Children play to have fun, not to go out and smash their opponents into the boards because their coach wants toughness. Moreover, as players reach the higher and more competitive levels of hockey, the coach’s instructions become more explicit: “…it is not
enough for a player to ‘play good’. [They] must also be tough, and one method is to get into an occasional fight. Fighting and toughness sometimes go hand-in-hand” (Vaz 101). An occasional fight is not the way to show your coach you are tough, even in the higher levels. A player that hits when necessary, takes out their man, and does not let their opponents walk out are equally as tough as the players that fight; one player wants to play the game, whereas the other does not care if they are suspended. The continual demand by coaches for toughness is out of control; with the amount of fighting, coaches should take notice that perhaps this essential component needs reconsideration.

Furthermore, when hockey violence shifts from the players to the parents, it should be obvious that aggression needs to be checked. Fighting does not only occur on the ice, but in the crowd amongst the parents. One of the most horrendous incidents in youth hockey history was between a father and a coach. On July 5, 2000, Michael Costin was supervising a hockey practice, while Thomas Junta watched from the stands. “Junta became enraged when he saw body-checking in what was supposed to be a non-contact scrimmage” (Lavoie 2002). After arguing on the ice and in the hallway, Junta left; returning a few minutes later, a second fight broke out. Costin, there in the rink, was brutally beaten to death, while several of the young hockey players watched, including the children of both men. “Violence among parents and coaches has worsened over the last decade…” (National Alliance for Youth Sports 2002). Fred Engh, the president of the National Alliance for Youth Sports, feels that “you have to have the maturity to deal with the emotions of having your child involved in sports, but unfortunately we have some parents on sidelines screaming and yelling” (Lavoie 2002). Several cities have
started three new programs to work towards the prevention of parental misbehavior that has become all too common.

Jupiter, Florida was the first community to make Mandatory training seminars for the parents. “This is a two hour counseling seminar, where parents were given coaching strategies. Parents were taught how to deal with the emotional ups and downs of watching their kids play sports” (Wolf 2001). This program was so crucial that children of parents who did not attend were not permitted to play in the league. These seminars resulted in improved behavior in the parents. Cleveland started a program called the Silent Weekends, where “parents and coaches [could] not make any negative noise at games. Occasional supportive applause or light praise [was] okay, but that [was] it” (Wolf 2001). Sounds that were usually drowned out by the parents hooting and hollering could now be heard; the children were communicating with each other and they were laughing and having fun. Zero Tolerance, is the most potent approach of all. “This rule allows the ref to stop the game at any point if he or she feels a parent or coach is getting out of hand” (Wolf 2001). If the parent does not fix their behavior the referee has the power to toss the offensive adult from the rink. “When the ref[eree] starts bouncing loudmouths, it’s amazing to see how quickly the rest of the crowd behaves itself” (Wolf 2001). If parents are unable to control their aggression, how can players, their children, be able to control their physical violence? Parents need to understand that anything can happen when playing hockey and if they can not control their emotions then they should not be at the games. Parents need to recognize that the players are their children, individuals who look to them as role models. Their inability to moderate their violence
makes it more difficult for players to recognize when violence is out of control and to stop fighting.

Every NHL hockey team consists of several players that are known as the *enforcers* and it is these players that youths idolize. Marty McSorley, a seventeen-year NHL veteran, and Todd Bertuzzi, a Vancouver Canucks all-star forward, are both well known for their aggressive play. It was common to see these players in a fight, then simply playing hockey. As described by Klein and Reif Marty McSorley is described as follows:

“[He] was a ticking time bomb, overdue to go off again, a filthy player with a track record to prove it. This is a guy who, if hockey were run properly, would have been thrown out of the game years ago.” (Klein and Reif 2000)

His aggressiveness is demonstrated in his “nine suspensions times by the NHL for dirty and dangerous play, including five times specifically for stick-related mayhem” (Klein and Reif 2000). The reporter was correct too, McSorley finally exploded, on February 21, 2000, when he bashed Vancouver Canucks player, Donald Brashear, on the head during the game, with three seconds remaining. Brashear was skating with his back to McSorley when he was struck with a stick in the side of the head, sending him crumpling to the ice. Brashear later recovered from a concussion and resumed playing with the Canucks. The league gave a twenty-three game suspension, ending McSorley’s season and his NHL career (Klein and Reif 2000). After millions of young hockey fans witnessed this assault on national television, there was an exact replica of the incident during a youth hockey game the same week in Windsor. Jared Flick, a fifteen-year-old bantam player, suffered a severe concussion, from a high-sticking hit, leaving him dizzy and speech impaired. Clearly, children idolize these NHL players, meaning the NHL players need to control their behaviour, to help decrease youth hockey violence.
Todd Bertuzzi, another NHL player, also ended his season early after he attacked Steve Moore, a player on the Colorado Avalanche. “Bertuzzi slugged and jumped Moore from behind, driving him headfirst into the ice” (ESPN 2004). Moore suffered from deep cuts on his face and two broken vertebra; luckily, his spinal cord was not injured, and returned to a stable condition. Betruzzi’s suspension was intended to send the message that the NHL will not tolerate premeditated attacks. He would miss a minimum seventeen games; the rest of the season (ESPN 2004). When young hockey players see their idols act in these violent ways without receiving a severe punishment, they are lead to believe that such actions are acceptable for them too. After the McSorley incident, “twelve-year-old boys [were spewing] venom in internet hockey chat rooms to try to defend McSorley, shift the blame, or claim there’s no problem at all” (Klein and Reif 2000). It is a grave concern when these boys and girls cannot differentiate between right and wrong and where to draw the line on physical contact in sports. Tim Robbins, an actor, hockey fanatic, and avid rec-league player, “had no difficulty discerning [McSorley’s attack]” (Klein and Reif 2000). While on the David Letterman show, “he stared blankly [at the camera], extend his right hand: ‘…hockey…’ – and then extended his left: ‘…assault.’ Really, what’s left to be said?” (Klein and Reif 2000). Robbins understands the severity of the attack and explains that this should not be repeated on National television. The children idolize and replicate theses NHL enforcers, making the game of hockey unsafe and violent.

There has and continues to be many violent acts in youth hockey, resulting in serious injuries. For sixteen-year-old Neal Goss, hockey was a life changing experience when he was hit and paralyzed from the chest down. Now a quadriplegic, his life will
never be the same. Goss was cross-checked head-first into the boards one second after the game-ending buzzer, by the opposite team’s captain. This incident was investigated and brought to court. Prosecutor, Michael Waller, thinks that if “this had happened during the game, we wouldn’t have investigated it” (Klein and Reif 2000). Another person said “a couple of seconds might have remained on the clock when the hit occurred – that therefore, it happened within the context of the game” (Klein and Reif 2000). But does this justify the attack? Any attack that “wasn’t a ‘mistake’ or an ‘accident’…[and] was a premeditated act fully intended to harm a player…” (Klein and Reif 2000) must be dealt with the same way it would be off ice. There is no tolerance for premeditated acts and “leagues need to severely punish players for excessive violence on the ice, including permanent suspension” (Fernandez 2000). Taking a plea bargain, the defendant was given “one year in prison, community service and probation…. [He] is guilty of simple battery which is a lesser charge than the felonious battery charge he was originally faced with” (Fernandez). The irony, unfortunately, is that someone had to get hurt before violence in hockey became an issue discerning investigation. If we do not start controlling the violence, no one will want to play hockey. These youth hockey acts will be taken care of severely to put an end to violence in hockey.

It is obvious that hockey has become a very violent environment; yet, many people are not trying to stop aggression. These boys and girls are learning to play the game aggressively because their coach has taught them that being tough is most important because it wins hockey games. Parent rage at sports games is a problem because their children cannot be expected to play cleanly if their spectators act more aggressively then them. NHL players need to remember their social position as idols for
young hockey players. These children want to be like them, meaning they will replicate their behaviours, even violent ones, especially when they go unpunished or are glorified. These youth hockey players know what they are doing on the ice and the consequences involved in violent acts. Other children, like the defendant in the Goss case, will be treated harshly in order to end youth hockey. The players will do anything to impress and be like their coaches, parents, and the NHL players, even if it involves violence. People need to start setting appropriate examples for these younger players to follow, creating a skillful youth hockey association instead of a violent one.
Bibliography

Books:


Articles:


