



## Danger on the Ice

Ice Hockey is a very physical game, even for the girls with no-checking rules. Collisions with other players, the goals, and the boards can all cause injury, sometimes catastrophic in nature. USA Hockey has documented that a player can break his or her neck by sliding head first into the boards at *walking speed*. Concussions are a growing problem in the NHL ending many players' careers and many youth players suffer concussions that can and do have lasting effects. As coaches it is our responsibility to make sure that all of the skaters on the ice are protected.

A recent *NY Times* article cited a survey of professional hockey players about wearing face shields. The majority said they would gladly wear one IF they were required. Since they are not required most players are willing to accept the inherent dangers because they feel that wearing a shield may limit their vision and hurt their performance. It is interesting however to see so many young players like Sidney Crosby wear face shields. Of course these players are professionals and play for a living. They feel they need every advantage they can get.

So what kind of dangers do we face as youth coaches? Well let me suggest a couple facts and thoughts. First, since 1999 nation wide four youth coaches have died as a result of head injuries suffered in practice. Long time East St. Paul coach, Wes Barrett, fell victim to a needless death in 1999 as he fell to the ice during practice and suffered a severe head injury. In Colorado Springs, the home of USA Hockey, the next year a Pee Wee coach fell while demonstrating backwards skating at his son's team practice. The coach fractured his skull and died shortly after. Are these isolated incidents? At first glance one would think so but I know personally of five incidents in the last year where a coach has fallen or been knocked down and suffered a head injury. In two cases, the coaches missed a couple days of work while they were recovering. Any of those could have been fatal.

Of course wearing a helmet while you are on the ice would nearly eliminate this risk to all coaches. Michigan Amateur Hockey made helmets required 6 years ago. Other areas in the county have followed suit. The topic will appear on the USA Hockey agenda this next year because it really makes sense to protect coaches as well as players. Minnesota Hockey has a survey running on the web site and predictably (remember the NHL player survey cited above?) the no helmet vote is way ahead. Maybe we are asking the wrong question. Coaches in Michigan said they would quit coaching if they were required to wear a helmet. The helmet rule was passed by Michigan Hockey and guess what? The coaches did not quit and they all wear a helmet. There have been no reported head injuries to coaches in the past six years.

I have been suggesting for many years that coaches wear helmets. I have worn one for 4 years. I know that at least twice that it has saved me from a injury on the ice. I see coaches wearing them and hope that more and more coaches will see that it only makes sense to follow suit. The new RBK helmet is actually quite comfortable and for those of you who have told me that your melon is too large for a helmet, this one will fit.

Another area of great concern is the recent trend of unzipping the breezer pant legs or even cutting them if the pants do not have zippers. The breezer pants are designed to protect the skater from injury due to contact with other players, the puck, sticks, the ice and the wall. The pants also protect the skater from skate cuts. By opening the pant legs the skaters are exposing the inside of their legs to potentially very serious injury from skates. The thigh area has several very large arteries which if lacerated would cause significant blood loss in just a few minutes.

The National High School Federation considers this to be a serious matter. The Federation passed a rule effective this year that the pant legs must be zipped or uncut in order to play. A violation of the rule is a game misconduct.

As a youth coach you are responsible for the safety of your players. Please require them to zip the pant legs or get new breezers if the zipper is broken or the pants are cut open. You do not want to have to apply a compression point to stem blood flow while waiting for the paramedics to arrive.

Minnesota Hockey will be asked to consider helmets for coaches and proper breezers as rules for next season. As leaders of young people you can elect to take action on both of these items before they are required.

Have a safe time at the rink,

Hal Tearse  
Minnesota Hockey Youth Coaches Association