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HEADLINE: Kids, you owe NHL

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When the NHL told the hockey world it was planning to essentially revolutionize the game, two immediate thoughts sprang to mind.

First, it won't last. They just don't have the guts to make it happen.

The second was the fleeting notion that if the Bettman administration actually did follow through this time after being the boys who cried wolf on so many other occasions, it was crystal clear who the ultimate beneficiary would be.

My 7-year-old son.

Dawson's his name, and with a year of novice house league hockey with Coach Ed under his belt and the crazy notion implanted in his brain that he loves hockey most of all, right after God and family, he may one day inherit a game that will be far better than that we've foisted on the most recent generation of Canadian children.

By the time Dawson and boys and girls his age turn 12 or 13, the fabulous, skill-enhancing changes the NHL instituted this season may have percolated down to the lowest levels of the sport in Canada.

Imagine that.

This is what happens, ladies and gentlemen, when the NHL uses its powers for good, not evil.

Instead of debating "The Code" and whether Steve Moore deserved what he got, this country is seriously taking steps to develop a better game based on speed, skill and hitting without all the hooking, holding, tripping and interference that our children have been taught as more important than stickhandling and scoring goals for the last 15 to 20 years.

Imagine that.

At Hockey Canada's annual general meeting in St. John's, Nfld., over the weekend,

delegates approved a strategic plan for the 2006-07 season that essentially embraces most of the important changes that have improved the NHL so drastically over the past season.

The new enforcement standards on holding and hooking. Expanding the offensive zone. Moving the nets back closer to the end boards. Shrinking goalie gear.

Pretty much the whole nine yards.

NHL officials, of course, weren't thinking of this kind of trickle-down effect when they tried to change the game. They were trying to save the industry and their jobs, really, after a terrible lockout.

But for decades the NHL has had an enormous effect on the North American hockey scene, whether it wanted to admit it or not, and to a significant extent it was a negative effect.

"Yeah, before it was like we were telling kids not to try at home what they were seeing on television," said NHL vice-president Colin Campbell yesterday.

Even this season, many hockey parents were horrified to watch the way girls and boys hockey was still being played compared with the NHL. They'd watch all the hooking and holding called when the Leafs played the Canadiens, and they go watch their kids play and witness the same old water-skiing and rodeo show.

The referees, you see, were being told to call the game the same old way, and the coaches were coaching it the same old way. As one NHL assistant coach with kids in GTA minor hockey told me two years ago, "None of the kids want the puck. It hurts too much."

Now, Hockey Canada has at least started the process of serious change, although it's still going to take a long time for it to seep down to every province and every local association.

Don't forget, there are still lots of knuckleheads out there who believe every ill in the game could still be solved with more fighting and the removal of the instigator rule.

Hockey Canada, however, wants all of its branches to adopt the philosophy for next season that the stick should "only be used to play the puck" and not "in any way to impede another player's progress."

Hooking, tripping, holding and interference - those tactics that our children have been forced to learn and use - are to be called "with very strict enforcement."

Imagine that.

"We needed a year off to get the full impact, so people have to understand this will take time," said Campbell, the point man for the NHL's new look.

"We needed the time to address our problems and to get the support of everybody in a non-competitive time, which was crucial.

"Do I feel good about what Hockey Canada announced? It does make me feel good.

Nothing is achieved without pain, but it was worth it."

One day, maybe I'll get Dawson to send him a thank-you note.