



Making Hockey Safer and Better by Taking the Hits Out of Peewees

Player safety is reason enough to eliminate body checking in Pee wee hockey. Clear cut medical research makes the case convincingly. A multi-year study in Canada, for example, showed a 30% reduction in injuries at the Pee wee level without checking, and a second study showed no increase in injuries for players who advanced to bantams without prior checking experience in Pee wees. These studies were not speaking about minor injuries either. Injury levels at Pee wees are the highest of all boys hockey, and concussions (mild traumatic brain injury) lead the way.

Faced with medical evidence promoting safety, opponents of the proposed rule change have raised valid points of concern which deserve a thorough discussion..

The first point of concern is that most girls will choose to play Pee wee hockey instead of U-12.

A representative from District 8, believes that more girls will move to youth hockey at Pee wees, and that we might lose some teams at that level but gain teams on the youth level. Maybe he is correct. One way or the other, the kids will still play, and that is the important thing.

Here is a comment from a parent whose three daughters played youth hockey. One still plays with the boys.

“The concern that the girls will migrate to the boy’s teams if there is no checking does not fit with the great experiences that girls have on the girls teams. The girls like their teams the way they are without boys. They have much more fun and enjoy being together. In Youth hockey the few girls are a small minority of one or two among each 17 player team, The boys are occasionally insensitive to the girls and it takes a special individual to persist in that environment. Sometimes a zealous parent will want a girl to play with the boys to gain more body contact, but most parents just want the girls to enjoy a sport like hockey. The entry point for most girls is U10 or earlier”

and that is where they make friends and want to stay. I would expect minimal movement to peewee youth from the girls side because the general opinion among girls is that the boys take hockey way too seriously.

The logical action behind the concern would be to allow boys to get more concussions so that fewer girls would cross over to Peewees. That would be hard for any of us to endorse.

A second point of concern is that without body contact, the kids will get “killed” when they go to Bantams and play Canadian teams. We know that is not likely based on research from Canada, and we have a program from USA Hockey to prevent this possible problem.

USA Hockey’s ADM (American Development Model) program is designed to make hockey better by teaching the progression of body contact into body checking as the players get older. The revised CEP curriculum which all coaches will be required to review this fall has a strong body contact component with a progression that begins in squirts and moves through Peewees into bantams. Unlike the Peewee coach in the recent ESPN video encouraged, the program teaches the correct way to play an opponent with the objective of regaining the puck not just “wrecking” the opponent. This spring, USA Hockey will announce an extensive player education program that will allow most of the body contact that is currently occurring. The rationale is to take the “big hits” out of the game, and to return to a skill-based game with proper body contact. The game will be safer for all players because they will have to learn some new skills that will serve them well at higher levels. In essence, the new USA Hockey program will disallow “physical intimidation” but reward speed, skill and puck possession.

A third point of concern is that “coaches are not capable of teaching the required techniques”. A few district directors have suggested that their youth coaches are not able to teach angling and proper body contact skills because they are not interested much in developing players for the long term. The directors assert that many coaches are unwilling to learn because they know that they are only one- or two-year coaches, enlisted while their own children play in a particular age group. These directors feel that we cannot expect more from the volunteer coaches.

As coach in Chief of Minnesota Hockey, however, I think that this point denies volunteer coaches the credit they deserve. If every district had a skills coach to help across the district, we would make great strides in even one year. The local association skills coach program that we have been running the past 4 years has proven to be very popular and will be expanded to teach body contact skills. USA Hockey’s revised Coach Education Program (CEP)

will also emphasize these skills that are required as a result of the rule change.

Most youth coaches are coaching their own children and are interested in their teams being successful and free from avoidable injury. The key to team success is teaching the skills to win, and we can count on coaches to want to learn how to help their players succeed. Players from the NHL down all learned quickly how to adapt to the no-hooking/interference environment that began six years ago, and players and coaches will also adapt to the Pee wee rule change very quickly.

A fourth point of concern is about the risk of concussions in girls. This is a valid and important concern, but it does not relate to checking in Youth Hockey because most of the players we are trying to protect are boys. It is true that girls have as high a rate of concussions and other injuries in hockey, and also in any other sport they play even with modified rules. The reasons are unclear to date. Possible reasons are less neck and shoulder strength, cultural issues in how they are raised, less overall body strength, and lack of anticipation of contact, but the fact is that most of the concussions in Pee wees are occurring in boys

So where do we go from here?

When I first laced on my skates nearly fifty years ago, body checking was permitted in mites and squirts. Many youth players went helmetless or wore only the flimsiest of helmets, and many goalies wore no mask. (In early March, Montreal Canadiens Hall-of-Fame goalie Ken Dryden admitted that “in a whole childhood and adolescence of playing goalie, I didn't wear a mask until 1965, when I had to wear one on my college team. How could *I* have been so stupid?”) Face cages and protective mouth guards were unknown.

Each step of USA Hockey's steady march toward greater safety met initial resistance by people uncomfortable with change, but each step gained quick acceptance as thoughtful parents and coaches realized that many youngsters would be spared avoidable injury. The Pee wee no-checking rule will win the same acceptance.

As with most changes we face in life, the fear of unknowns is unsettling. The more we learn about the Pee wee no-checking proposal and the resultant changes, however, the more it is apparent that the proposal is a minor change that will greatly reduce injury levels across the state, and will advance the careers of better skilled players in the districts that take coaching and player development seriously.

As chair of the Safety Committee for Minnesota Hockey, I report that the Committee very strongly favors the rule change. As Coach in Chief of Minnesota Hockey, with a long history of coaching and playing at all levels, I understand and respect the points of concern that many coaches and parents have about this proposed change.. But I also understand that a substantial body of medical research stands behind the proposed rule change, and the change will benefit the children who play the game.

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