

London Free Press (Ontario)

January 19, 2009 Monday
FINAL EDITION

Fighting in no way enhances hockey

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SECTION: EDITORIAL/OPINION; Vox Pop; Pg. A7

LENGTH: 564 words

The recent death of Don Sanderson, a 21-year-old player in an OHA game, has given rise to heated debate among hockey fans, coaches, parents and players across Canada.

Strong resistance to ending fighting still exists. This attitude is best captured by our Canadian icon, Don Cherry. As Cherry left the Sanderson funeral, he was seen on national television news offering the following thought: "I hope the anti-fighting lobby doesn't try to exploit this death."

A death should not be exploited, but as a society we try to learn lessons from tragedies.

One puck in a billion over the years struck and killed a young girl at a Columbus Blue Jackets home game several years ago and soon every NHL team had netting placed behind the goalies to protect fans. Society tries to address safety issues, whether we pass laws to wear seatbelts or remove dangerous playground equipment.

Hockey is no different. Goalies didn't wear masks in the old days and helmets and visors were unheard of as a regular part of equipment. All you need is one tragedy and every child has to wear a neck guard before they are allowed on the ice.

Fighting is not recommended by physicians. As we learn more about concussions, we think about the serious consequences of blows to the head.

We try to reduce the risks by eliminating checks from behind or intentional elbows to the head. A punch to the head is no different. There have been enough injuries to question the wisdom of allowing the fights long before Sanderson's death.

Asking junior players to fight is a workplace safety issue. Although injuries can occur even in a game without fighting, league officials have a fundamental responsibility to reduce risks where possible.

It is impossible to defend fighting as part of the game. Our juniors' world championships were won without a single fight. Fighting has been eliminated in international, university and high school hockey. Other physical sports, like football, don't allow fighting.

It is impossible to defend fighting as an integral part of hockey. What do we teach our children about the meaning and value of sport? Standing and cheering while

teenagers beat up on each other in junior hockey sends a message about acceptable conduct for children.

Fighting is fraudulent. Players don't fight during a playoff or close regular season game. Many fights are planned before the game to entertain the fans. Fans that hunger for these fights can go to WWE events. The NHL might get higher attendance and new fans, especially families, to go to their games without the fighting.

Every time I speak publicly or write about this issue, I receive many e-mails and calls that question my manhood. I can't be a "real" man or an athlete. Herein lies the ultimate resistance about addressing this violence.

Many Canadian men are hesitant to speak out about this violence because of the reactions they may get from other men. We have developed a very narrow definition of masculinity.

I have had former players confess they hate the fighting, but don't want to challenge the status quo because of the personal costs. Even retired NHL players wish for an end to the violence, but can't challenge the system because they benefited from the money or personal protection they received from the fighting.

As a man, father, coach and educator, I believe we need to be clear with our boys that the fighting must end. If not now, when?