

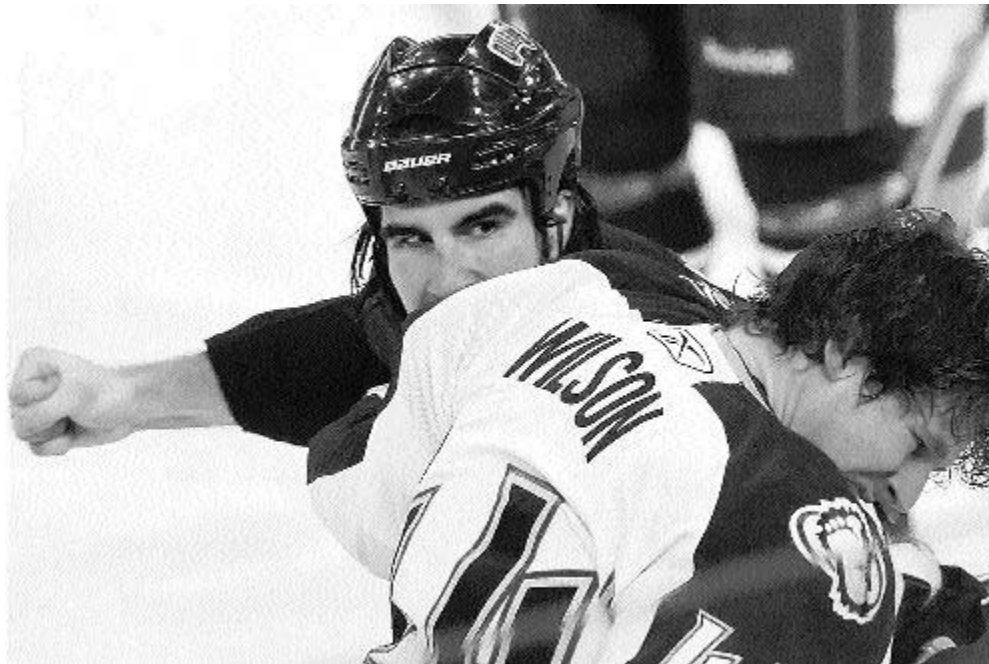
Ottawa Citizen

November 21, 2009

## Getting hit over the head

**With all the concern about 'head shots' in the NHL these days, you'd think someone would notice what happens in fights**

By Peter G. Jaffe, Citizen Special



**The Colorado Avalanche's Ryan Wilson, right, and Edmonton Oilers' Zack Stortini fight during the second period of their NHL hockey game in Edmonton on Wednesday.**

**Photograph by: Dan Riedlhuber, Reuters, Citizen Special**

The news that the NHL's general managers are hoping to eliminate blind-side head shots from the game after some well-publicized incidents may be the tipping point to re-examining fighting in hockey.

The NHL in recent weeks has seen players with serious head injuries and concussions after questionable hits to the head by their opponents. The OHL has seen a player suspended for the season for hospitalizing a player by running his head into the glass.

When GMs think about an elbow or shoulder hitting a head against the boards, they should also consider punches to the head. Intentional punching to the head is called fighting and still remains an integral part of the hockey strategy and entertainment.

Last season, this issue was the focus after the tragic death of Whitby Dunlops defenceman Don Sanderson as a result of a fight.

A few days later there was another near tragedy in the AHL in which two players dropped their gloves off the opening faceoff and one was eventually left convulsing in a seizure before being rushed to the hospital.

What's the difference between an elbow or shoulder to the head and a punch to the head?

It is educational to examine all the public statements about blind-side shots to the head to see the same arguments applied to fighting. Here is a sample of the thinking out loud about the issue after the NHL's recent general managers' meeting:

- "It's never going to be a safe workplace, but we've got to make it as safe as we can." -- Toronto Maple Leafs general manager Brian Burke.

- "The hitting in the game is great, but every once in a while you have to sit back and say, 'That hit may be legal, but is there something wrong with it?'" -- Washington Capitals GM George McPhee.

- "A direct blow to the head, where there's no other physical contact, might be a demarcation line. I think that's a good suggestion," -- Vancouver Canucks GM Mike Gillis.

The current research on concussions and head injuries doesn't make a distinction between a blind-side hit at top speed and a punch to a head. In fact, one could argue that some of the blind-side hits may be accidental whereas the fights are willful acts of violence, attempts to knock out or knock down an opponent.

Of course there is implied consent by being on the ice but many players now freely admit that they are coerced into fighting by the same coaches and GMs who are now expressing worry about hits to the head.

When the Canuck's Todd Bertuzzi sucker punched Colorado's Steve Moore in 2004 and ended Moore's career with severe head and neck injuries, he was sued for \$15 million in damages.

In March 2008, Bertuzzi filed a lawsuit against coach Marc Crawford, alleging that he was contractually obliged to obey Crawford and that therefore Crawford shares responsibility for the

injury to Moore. Crawford denies the allegations but the lawsuit exposed the dirty secrets of fighting.

Commissioner Gary Bettman still wanted to distance the incident from the general problem of fighting and punching people in the head: "I don't think there's any appetite to abolish fighting from the game."

He might need more lawsuits to enhance his appetite. Fighting has run its course as part of the sport.

Those fans have their outlet in ultimate fighting or professional wrestling. College hockey and Olympic hockey have banned fighting.

No other major team sport condones fighting. Violators are suspended for long periods of time.

Hockey is such a fast moving and exciting sport. There should be no time for fights, which are increasingly arranged in advance by goons who get little ice time otherwise. We send poor messages to boys about how to resolve conflicts and play fair in sports.

Times change. Old-timers thought Jacques Plante was a sissy for wearing a mask and now all goalies wear masks with pride.

More recently, you were called a sissy if you had a helmet and visor, but we now accept them as standard equipment. The sissies were brave pioneers who dared to challenge the hockey establishment.

Hockey is an incredible sport that requires the highest level of skill and speed. We should cherish all that is to be admired in our national pastime. However, it is time to turn the page on the lack of respect the hockey establishment has for the real meaning of sport and competition.

Allowing players to take cheap shots and blind-side other players with hits to the head needs to be outlawed. And having players punch each other in the head is no better.

Peter G. Jaffe is a professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Ontario and academic director at the Centre for Research on Violence against Women & Children.

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