

The Toronto Star

April 18, 2011 Monday

His goal is to get hockey violence off the ice; Brutal hits and fights send wrong message to kids, warns professor

SECTION: ENTERTAINMENT; Pg. E1

LENGTH: 939 words

Peter Jaffe has been a hockey fan for 57 years. In Grade 6, he was a proud starting goalie for his public school. This year, he's assistant coach on his 13-year-old son's house league team.

In playoff season, his heart is with the Montreal Canadiens. In his hometown, he cheers on the London Knights of the Ontario Hockey League. But Jaffe, 62, is fed up with the endless images of hockey players punching, brawling and blindsiding each other. As a professor and anti-violence expert at the University of Western Ontario and a father of four sons, he despairs at the message it sends.

In February, he wrote a public letter to National Hockey League Commissioner Gary Bettman calling for a ban on fighting. It was co-signed by Dr. Graham Pollett, medical officer of health for the Middlesex-London Health Unit. The Ontario Public School Boards' Association has also offered its support.

Jaffe says he's heard from half a dozen professional players too intimidated to speak out against fighting in a culture that glorifies it with endless replays and fight reels.

Since several controversial hits this season - one that has sidelined Pittsburgh superstar Sidney Crosby for months, and another that got teammate Matt Cooke kicked out for the season - the longtime hockey fight critic says the issue has become more pressing.

The Star spoke to Jaffe from his London home last week.

When did you start worrying about the effects of hockey violence?

When I started taking my kids to games and they were frightened by what they saw. My son asked me during a junior game when players were beating up on each other, "Dad, why are they doing that?" What struck me was that any explanation I gave made no real sense.

What concerns you most?

I worry about the kind of role models we have for our children and what violence in sport communicates to them about the real meaning of sports, the values and attitudes about competition.

One of my concerns is how this filters down to younger players.

We forget that junior hockey players are teenagers who are high school students and in order to make the NHL they're being asked to engage in the same behaviour.

How does fighting in sports affect young fans and players?

It's impossible to do research and separate out the effects of just hockey violence. But hockey is so much a part of our culture that I think it's one of the most powerful (forces) in the messages it sends. It tells boys that this is an appropriate way to behave - to get back at someone, to get even. It teaches a lack of respect for your opponent. It sets adults up to be hypocrites because we tell children we don't believe in violence yet on the other hand, we stand and cheer.

So it affects kids of all ages?

I think it gets passed on to every level. It fundamentally comes down to what does it mean to be a man and to be a boy. If being a boy is dropping the gloves, I have a lot of trouble with that. If being a boy is having strength and skill but also having self-control and restraint and respect for yourself and others, I'm certainly more in favour of the latter.

Have you received a response to the letter you sent calling for a ban on fighting?

I sent it to Gary Bettman and every national hockey team organization. I've only had one response.

From whom?

(Leafs general manager) Brian Burke. He told me I'm entitled to my opinion.

Are you surprised?

I think the people in charge of the NHL don't really get it. They've shown no appetite to deal with this issue. They're not facing up to the real problem in the sport. I think they're afraid that somehow by taking out the fighting and taking out the violence they're going to lose some of their fan base.

Many fans and players say it's part of the game.

That's an absurd argument. There were no fights during the Olympics, no fights during the World Junior championships, no fights in college hockey. It's so crazy to think that two men

who bump into each other at great speed playing hockey have to drop their gloves and get even. It can be banned overnight.

Do the recent spate of serious injuries from hits mean there may be less resistance to change?

I think we've reached a tipping point with parents and fans. I don't think it's a tipping point with the NHL or junior hockey. They hope we go away and forget some of the hits.

The NHL is looking at some improvements in terms of the intentional hits to the heads and player safety. But I think they're dealing with one symptom, and not the underlying culture that promotes and celebrates the violence.

Are parents and the general public talking about this?

I've been outspoken, so I don't think there's a function or party I go to where somebody doesn't express an opinion. I've talked to a lot of people who've stopped watching the game or don't want their kids to play. On the other hand, I get a lot of backlash from people who question my manhood.

Do you believe the culture will ever change?

I'm hopeful that more people will speak out and the people promoting these messages will become dinosaurs as it resonates less and less with the public.

So you're optimistic?

I've no doubt that 10 years from now we're going to look at old footage of hockey players beating up on each other and we'll wonder how we ever let this carry on - the way we look back at footage of old goalies playing without a mask.

This will change but it's a bumpy road and it's going to take a lot of people at the table to try to influence the decision-makers.

It takes a lot of courage for players to stand up and say it might have been like this before but we're not going to be part of this any more. Times change and unfortunately hockey has been slow to catch up.