

London activist takes a swing at hockey fights

A silent majority deplore fighting but don't dare say so, claims Peter Jaffe

By PATRICK MALONEY, THE LONDON FREE PRESS

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A silent chorus of hockey players, including some NHLers, is afraid to publicly speak out against fighting in the sport, an anti-violence advocate says.

In the wake of Mario Lemieux's anger over a brawl involving his Pittsburgh Penguins, Peter Jaffe of the University of Western Ontario has co-signed a public letter urging NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman to ban fights.

Jaffe says he speaks for a group of hockey players too intimidated by the sport's culture to speak up.

"I have contact with junior hockey and NHL players and all of them are afraid to come out publicly," Jaffe said. "They say (speaking out) will hurt their careers; they'll be seen as chickens. There's a code of silence. If you challenge the issue you're going to be singled out."

Jaffe wrote his letter to Bettman with Graham Pollett, London's chief public health official, and Ray Hughes of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

A huge hockey fan, Jaffe says he has interviewed countless major-junior players and three NHLers who've expressed those anti-fighting feelings off the record.

NHL fighting is receiving renewed scrutiny after a Feb 11 brawl between the New York Islanders and Pittsburgh.

That brawl prompted the Penguins' famed owner, Lemieux, to rip the league's response.

"If the events relating to (the fight) reflect the state of the league, I need to re-think whether I want to be a part of it," Lemieux said. "What happened . . . wasn't hockey. It was a travesty."

Jaffe and Pollett cite Lemieux's comments in the letter to Bettman and the NHL governors. They also note fighting disappears in the playoffs and is a non-entity in U.S. college hockey.

E-mails to NHL spokesperson and Bill Daly, the NHL's deputy commissioner, were not returned.

The concerns of Jaffe and Pollett appear to be two-pronged: The physical damage, specifically concussions, fighting poses to players and the message about violence it sends to fans, particularly children.

But any attempt to alter hockey's culture, given the passionate support many fans have for fighting, will face severe resistance.

A New York-based website, hockeyfights.com, underscores on-ice pugilism's popularity. The site, featuring video clips and analysis of NHL fights, draws a whopping 10 million page views a month.

Its founder is David Singer, an articulate web developer and father of two who questions whether hockey fighting hurts society.

“I can’t think of anyone who loves a good hockey fight more than I do and I certainly know better than to walk down the street and punch someone in the face,” he said.

“A group targeting all forms of violence . . . is looking for some sort of nanny state and not looking for anybody to have self-responsibility or parental responsibility.

“The players will tell you, ‘I want to hurt the other guy but not injure him.’ It sounds contradictory but it’s how they go about their business.”

Singer says he gets only a few e-mails every month complaining about hockey: “It seems to be wildly popular.”

Fighting clearly causes injuries. This season alone, Toronto tough guy Colton Orr and Calgary goon Raitis Ivanans were concussed in fights and Islanders goalie Rick DiPietro suffered a facial fracture.

Perhaps more important to Jaffe, is the impression it leaves on young fans.

“The fights go against everything else we tell children about their behaviour,” he said. “If no one was watching (hockey), I wouldn’t care. I’m concerned about the impact it has on boys and young men.”

Jaffe is less concerned with the torrent of nasty e-mails he expects to receive from pro-fighting fans.

Having spoken out publicly before, he’s prepared for another wave of nasty feedback.

“The bullies don’t own hockey. Hockey is my sport, too . It’s my favourite sport,” he said. “I also believe I’m part of the silent majority who are afraid to speak out because they’ll be drowned out by the Neanderthals who control the sport.”

Jaffe said he hopes his letter generates debate when Bettman meets with the NHL’s governors in March.

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An Open Letter to Gary Bettman and the NHL Board of Governors

We are enthusiastic, lifelong hockey fans who want to lend support to Mario Lemieux and many commentators’ views that the recent incidents of fighting in hockey cannot be tolerated. In particular, we endorse Mario Lemieux’s words after a recent Penguin-Islander brawl: “It was painful to watch the game I love turn into a sideshow The NHL (needs) to send a clear and strong message that those kinds of actions are unacceptable and embarrassing to the sport.” We agree with these sentiments.

We know that the NHL wants to put the best possible product on the ice and you are always looking for ways to improve the game. We would ask you to consider a number of points in your upcoming discussions:

1. There is increasing research and public awareness about the short- and long-term harm from concussions. We have gone from celebrating Sidney Crosby’s gold-medal goal last year to worrying about his future as a result of several blindside hits to his head. Other stars, like Marc Savard, are facing uncertain futures from repeated hits to the head. What is frequently missed is that there is no difference in a hit to the head by an elbow or shoulder than a punch to the head in a fight.

2. What message do we send junior-hockey leagues and younger players when we don't send stronger messages against hockey violence?

NHL players are role models and set the standards for youth playing hockey. Junior hockey players who aspire to be drafted by the NHL have to fight and risk injury in order to prove their worth and full potential. These young men are teenagers and face unnecessary risks of concussion to pursue their dreams.

Junior-hockey team owners have stated that their teens have to fight since they are suppliers to the NHL. Hockey should be about athletic speed, skill and determination rather than becoming a goon for a team. In a recent Bruins-Stars game, there were three fights in the first six seconds of play.

3. Many parents and educators are worried about the impact of media violence on our children's development. The fights and hits to the head have become a form of entertainment such as videos which glorify these incidents and sports shows that highlight the fights of the week as part of a hockey entertainment package. The media promotes the most negative aspects of the game and signals to our youth that this unsportsmanlike conduct is to be admired.

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