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New poll calls for hockey fight ban; HOCKEY VIOLENCE: Condoning such actions sends the wrong message to kids that we support violence in the sport.

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With every social change, there is a tipping point when a radical view suddenly makes sense for the majority of clear-thinking people. Smoking, drinking and driving, not wearing a seatbelt and polluting the environment were all at one time elephants in the room we ignored at our peril. Last year when the Thames Valley District school board and the Middlesex-London Health Unit passed resolutions suggesting it was time to ban fighting in junior hockey, we were met with outrage and criticism from the hockey establishment. After a radio program and news article on this topic, I received many calls and e-mails that were rude and, among other insults, questioned my manhood.

The recently released Nanos Research Media poll discovered more than two-thirds of Ontarians and 59 per cent of fans support a ban on fighting among 15-to 20-year-olds playing elite junior hockey. The convincing results are likely influenced by the latest well publicized incident which involved a brawl between the Quebec Remparts and the Chicoutimi Saguenéens of the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League. The brawl featured Patrick Roy's son beating up on the opposing goalie who had been innocently leaning on his goal when he was attacked. According to Nik Nanos, president of Nanos Research, the interpretation is clear; "These people believe it is the sports-manship and skill level of the game that is important, not the fights."

Why did the school board and health unit take a strong stand last year? Hockey violence is a health and safety issue. Condoning this violence sends a message to all children that we support violence in our national sport for our entertainment. It seems hypocritical of adults to be so concerned about violence in society and then stand and cheer at the John Labatt Centre while our teens beat up on other teens representing another Ontario city. Educators are concerned about all the influences on child and adolescent development, including issues like violence in sport that affect students' behaviours. Is it any wonder some young people grab their cellphone and record fights for YouTube rather than call the police? Fighting is entertainment. We forget that research done by the Middlesex-London Health Unit found fighting was associated with serious injuries like concussions. These injuries go beyond the socialization influence of hockey players as role models.

For too many years, we accepted the status quo and believed violence was inevitable in a high-speed contact sport like hockey. We thought players need this outlet. However, we are reminded when we watch the world junior championships that Canadian Juniors can win a gold medal without a single fight. Violence is banned in

every major sport and not allowed in Olympic, university, or high school hockey. Scandinavian countries do not condone fighting in hockey. The idea that boys or men have to beat up on each other if they bump in to each other is not a value that public education supports.

For many years we have heard excuses like "boys will be boys," "there will be more stick work" or it is part of "an essential strategy." Referees can clamp down on stick infractions just as they have done on all the clutching and grabbing infractions. Some of the recent incidents in the NHL demonstrate the league can have an impact on other "unsportsmanlike" conduct like elbows to the head. Fighting shouldn't be part of any sport strategy. One of the best Knights' games I attended this year had no fights because it was a close game against Belleville with end-to-end action. Coaches appear to encourage fights when the game is out of hand.

For too long, we have allowed a minority of the hockey establishment to control the game. Many coaches and general managers made a living being the tough guys and now perpetuate this aspect of the game. There are many fans and even former hockey players who are part of a silent majority that does not support violence in hockey. After the debates last year on hockey violence, I was approached by former junior players who spoke of being forced to fight to stay at the elite level. I asked them to speak out, but they feared repercussions.

More than 34 years ago, the Ontario government sponsored an inquiry into violence in hockey and amateur sport. The late William McMurtry, brother of retired chief justice Roy McMurtry, wrote in that report, "Sport, and particularly hockey, need not be a symptom of a sick society. Hockey can be a positive educational force -- a model -- to instil values such as co-operation, personal discipline, tolerance and understanding -- a catalyst to promote fellowship and mutual respect among individuals and people rather than a divisive force, fuelled by calculated animosities" Those words still ring true today. The OHL needs to take a stand for all its players. Maybe one day, the NHL and even Don Cherry can catch up with this new reality.