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Olympic men's hockey is how it's meant to be

BYLINE: BY PETER JAFFE, SPECIAL TO QMI AGENCY

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As we wait with much anticipation for Olympic men's hockey to begin Tuesday, it's a great time to reflect on the game.

It's the greatest sport to many, including myself. However, in the past several years we have witnessed an increasing call to curb the violence whether it's inflicted by a punch or an elbow to the head.

There have been critical incidents that have been drawn into the civil and criminal courts (for example, Todd Bertuzzi). There are too many TV news clips we have seen of players lying on the ice after an illegal hit and a young player's death after a fight (Don Sanderson).

Hockey Canada is hoping to look at player safety as part of a review of the sport during the Olympics. There is no quick fix.

A good place to start may be to enforce the rules and enhance accountability for repeat offenders as a Toronto minor hockey league has just done. It may involve more training for coaches and awareness for all the hockey moms and dads who dutifully drive their kids to the arenas. It may take more neurosurgeons speaking out about brain injuries related to concussions.

It's also time to challenge the culture and hockey establishment that allows this violence to flourish. We all express outrage when we see players injured, but we still see the violence as entertainment.

We know a punch to the head may cause brain injuries, but we still have sports channels that celebrate the best fights of the week. We know that willfully checking a player in the head with an elbow or shoulder is dangerous, but we still produce videos of these hits to the head set to music.

At a recent London Knights game, there was a replay of a hit to the head on the large screen as the "crunch of the game" as advertised by a wrecking company.

As adults we become hypocrites when we tell young players that we don't believe in violence and injuring other players, but then make these plays a form of entertainment.

It's time to speak out about this hypocrisy. It's time to offer our children some consistent messages about what we value in sports. It's time to ask Hockey Canada and all leagues, including the NHL, to end the violence.

Many of my colleagues in the province are speaking out about these issues. The Canadian Centre for Abuse Awareness (CCAA) has joined a growing number of individuals and organizations concerned about hockey violence.

"When players are told, coerced or simply expected through the culture of the game, to fight or deliver dangerous hits in hockey, one has to wonder when this becomes a form of abuse," says Ellen Campbell, president and chief executive of CCAA.

Kevin Wamsley, a professor and acting dean in the University of Western Ontario's faculty of health sciences, stated recently, "As the Olympic Games are about to begin, we might turn to international hockey to demonstrate that violence is not a necessary ingredient for excitement. In most instances, the Olympic Games present a model of competition where violence isn't naturalized or an endemic component of on-ice strategy.

"Our young hockey players are taught to embrace violence as an expected and desirable behaviour at all levels. This is confirmed and exemplified in the highest levels of the sport and in hockey broadcasts, highlight films, and video products. The game can be changed if we demand it."

As well, we have support from the Centre for Prevention Science, part of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. Its director, David Wolfe indicates that, "For too long we have ignored the negative impact of media violence. Sport is a prime culprit when it models abusive behavior as a primary entertainment value."

Ray Hughes, a national co-ordinator for school violence prevention programs through a collaborative effort with both Western and CAMH, makes the point well when he says, "How do we teach young athletes that violence doesn't belong on the ice when we show replays of fights on giant screens at the games, feature them as highlights on television and sports channels, and set them to music on rock-em, sock-em videos?"

Charles Tator, a Toronto brain surgeon who has had considerable experience in treating athletes with brain and spinal cord injuries, is promoting prevention. In a recent article he stated, "We are at a watershed as a result of all these events. All hockey people should join the prevention team to reduce hits to the head in hockey. We must not be deterred by sideshows from those advocating the status quo on violence."

As we sit down to watch the Olympics and see hockey at its best, we will note there are no fights. No one will turn off the TV due to a lack of violence. Players understand the severe consequences to themselves and their teams if they intend to fight or injure others. Players will be able to control themselves and not resort to violence as a necessary strategy.

If Canada wins gold, it will be because of skills, national pride, hard work and determination.

That's the way the game was intended to be played.

Peter Jaffe is a professor in the faculty of education at the University of Western Ontario, academic director of the Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children and a trustee for the Thames Valley District school board.