

Enterprise Article

Fighting face-to-face and hitting from behind: *New OHL rules have fans wondering about the future of the sport and the fates of their favourite fighters*

by Anna Taylor

Twenty-one-year-old Don Sanderson died because his helmet came off during a fight in a hockey game. The fallout from the death of the Whitby Dunlops defenseman has created waves in all hockey circles, and many teams and leagues are now instituting stricter rules regarding helmets.

Perhaps the most publicized new rule has come from the Ontario Hockey League: players are no longer allowed to remove their helmets for a fight, and if a helmet comes off, the linesmen must break up the fight immediately. The new rule came into effect on January 15, and reaction has been mixed.

It is clear that the rule has affected the way fights occur in hockey. CBC's documentary show *The Fifth Estate* ran an episode on fighting in the NHL recently, focusing on the potential elimination of such brutality. The OHL has not said their aim is to abolish fighting; however, this new rule certainly proves that it may be part of an unseen agenda.

League commissioner David Branch has stated many times in press releases regarding suspensions that the league must work to reduce bullying tactics. This feeds into the common misconception that fights are part of these so-called "bullying tactics," and this is what is causing head injuries in hockey. Until the Sanderson incident, more head injuries had been caused by illegal hits rather than fights. For example, Todd Bertuzzi's hit on Steve Moore was not a fight, but an illegal hit. On February 13 an Erie Otters player was injured when Zac Rinaldo of the London Knights checked him from behind. Nathan Moon of the Kingston Frontenacs was also injured after James Delory of the Oshawa Generals slashed him in the back of the knees with his hockey stick. Both Rinaldo and Delory were suspended. The last time a player in the OHL was seriously injured from a fight is not clear, but illegal hits seem to be a fairly common occurrence. This begs the question then, what should the priorities be when considering safety in the OHL?

The new rule, found on the Ontario Hockey League's website, basically states that players will receive automatic game misconduct penalties and a one game suspension should they remove their helmets or undo their chinstraps during an altercation. Players may also not take off each

other's helmets as a way to get around the rule. Helmets are meant to protect the player, so at first glance this rule makes a lot of sense.

It is appropriate to bring in this rule now, with fighting under such a microscope. The timing shows that the league is concerned about the safety of its teenage players, but is the OHL being too quick to react?

Former Peterborough Petes tough guy Justin Soryal believes that the league is acting too quickly with the new rule. He says that "fighting is something that should be looked at by the people in charge, but it's something that needs to be taken care of properly and not rashly." Soryal racked up 455 penalty minutes, including 50 fighting majors, in four seasons with the Petes, and in his overage season was generally looked upon by fans as the league's reigning heavyweight fighter.

Because the rule affects the players, they are the best ones to ask for opinions about it. This rule does nothing substantial for the fans, except give them fodder for intermission discussions at the beer stand. The players are the ones whose games will be affected, and whose careers may be affected.

Oshawa Generals defenseman Tony DeHart is not a fighter by nature, but is one of the tougher players on the team and has been known to stick up for a teammate or to participate in a fight to spark his team to action. He believes that the league is trying to slowly eliminate fighting, and that if that happens, it will be a lose-lose situation for both the fans and the players. The fans will miss out on an exciting aspect of the game, and the players will lose an element of their game that some have perfected.

"Fights will probably go down," DeHart says. "Guys will be more afraid they'll break their hands on their opponent's helmets. There are potential suspensions that will come with it and that won't put them in the coach's good graces."

Soryal agrees with the potential for hand injuries from the helmets. His only injury from a fight this year has been to his face, when his helmet cut him after his opponent punched the helmet. In the OHL, players are required to have visors on their helmets, making it much more likely that hand injuries will occur – there will be less to punch at. Players may decide the risk isn't worth it, which is something league officials are most likely hoping for. It's an easy way to decrease fighting without stating the intention to do so.

The new rule also states that: "If during the course of an altercation a player or player's helmets should become dislodged, the linesmen are to intervene immediately." This rule has since been examined and amended slightly, but for the first few weeks linesmen were required to jump in as soon as a player's helmet came off during a fight. This raised a very good issue: why protect the players at the expense of the officials, who wear significantly less protection than the players? Do OHL linesmen get paid enough to potentially take a punch? The answer is obviously no, as the rule has been amended to include the stipulation that officials jump in when they deem it is safe. This, however, is what they were supposed to be doing before the rule ever came into effect. The players fight it out until it is safe for the officiating crew to break it up.

Another drawback of the rule is the excitement factor. Fans are divided on whether fights are good. Some believe they are part of the game; others, that fights are mere brutality that shouldn't exist in a sport where skill is the name of the game. Whatever one believes, there is no denying the roar of the crowd when two players face off at centre ice. It's exciting for the players – it motivates them. It's exciting for the fans – they cheer louder and become more involved in the action.

The old saying "I went to the fights and a hockey game broke out," does not need to be true. The occasional scrap keeps the energy level in the arena high and makes for a more exciting game. Fans realize this. In 2005, Peterborough and London played a game that featured four fights in the first nine seconds of the game. The first two, even three, were cheered. By the fourth, it got silly. Most true hockey fans realize what a well-timed fight can do for momentum, and this is an argument that will be repeated over and over in favour of keeping fighting.

Matt Seegmiller, a third year defenseman for the Oshawa Generals, believes that the new rule will be good for the league, in the long run.

"It makes sense that you can't take the helmet off, and I think fighting will go down," he said. "If that's the goal, it will work."

Seegmiller is no stranger to injury from dirty hits – his rookie year he was hit hard into the boards by Kitchener's Mike Duco and missed significant time due to a concussion. He also has a scar under his right eye from a broken cheekbone that will forever remind him of the injury. He was hit again this year and suffered another concussion. Eligible for a fourth year with the Generals, Seegmiller has decided to pursue a university education instead of coming back to the league. He's not sure whether he will play hockey again any time soon. He needs some time to "clean out the cobwebs" in his brain that he's received from his concussions, before he makes his decision.

From watching a fair number of OHL games since mid-January, I have witnessed a decline in the number of fights. Neither team I observed this year could claim to have a true OHL tough guy on their team, but players like Jack Walchessen of the Petes and James Delory of the Generals, both of whom are their team's main fighters, saw a decrease. Walchessen fought 13 times before the rule, and has only four since.

The National Hockey League and the Ontario Hockey League are friendly. The OHL develops the players that go on to fame and fortune in the NHL, so the OHL is always quick to adopt any rules that the NHL institutes. However, it remains to be seen whether that will work the other way around. The NHL doesn't require that one wears a helmet during a game – all players do, because they realize the inherent risks of not wearing one. The NHL is currently under a lot of pressure to reduce fighting in the league due to recent media coverage like that of *The Fifth Estate*. The NHL is still deciding whether to make visors on helmets mandatory.

For a fight to occur, players must agree to participate. Certainly there are cases where players are jumped and forced into fighting, but the majority of fights in hockey take place between two willing partners. Players do not agree to be elbowed in the head, hit from behind, or slashed on the wrists. One player holds an advantage over another, and this is what causes those injuries.

Soryal says that players go into fights knowing the risks.

"It's scary that you can hit the ice and hurt your head but players try not to think about that."

Momentum plays a large part in the game and with adrenaline rushing, players don't always have time to consider their actions. Hockey is a game very much about the "now," not what comes next. It is prudent of the league to consider this and try to protect against it, especially in the case of young players. Once a player reaches junior age, and especially the NHL, however, they should be counted on to make their own rational choices.

UFC fighters are praised for their prowess in the ring. For those fans of hockey who are worried about the occasional fighting in the game, why are they not concerned about UFC, which is only fighting, for the sake of fighting? How many televised matches have men left, bloody, after being repeatedly punched, just for the glory of it? There is no sport, no skill, in UFC. Any fighter in the NHL will tell you that they fight for their teammates, for the momentum... not for the hell of it. That's not what it's for, despite what some fans believe. NASCAR drivers put themselves in

potentially dangerous situations every week, but the goal is to go as fast as you can. Speed limits might reduce the accidents that happen, but aren't the crashes the most interesting part?

Every sport has its toughness. The trick is to find the right balance for each sport. Hockey has it right. The tweaks the OHL is making to the rules will make sense in the long run, hopefully without damaging the integrity of the game. Even players who have been hurt by brutal cheap shots, like Matt Seegmiller, believe that fighting is a part of the game. Seegmiller knows that fighting is an integral part of the sport, and that eliminating it is not the right answer. If he'd been given a chance to fight, instead of being hit from behind into the boards, he might not have the scars that he does.

The OHL has it right – protect the players. They just need to re-examine their methods, and concentrate on where the real problem lies – not the fights that come after the fact, but the initial hits to the head, the hits from behind, the dirty hits that could end a player's career.