

No Tolerance

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ESSAY

It's time to take a hard line against violence in amateur hockey.

by Geoff Bennetts and Jennifer Sutherland

March was a busy month for the National Hockey League, and not just because of the trade deadline or because teams were jockeying for playoff positions. On March 5, the Philadelphia Flyers and Ottawa Senators were involved in the most highly penalized game in NHL history, combining for a total of 419 penalty minutes, which were mostly due to five consecutive brawls in the last two minutes of the game.

Just three days later, Vancouver's Todd Bertuzzi delivered a punch from behind to Colorado's Steve Moore before landing on him, in what appears to be a premeditated attack in response to Moore's hit on the Canucks' Markus Naslund three weeks earlier that forced Naslund to sit out three games with a concussion. Bertuzzi's retaliation left Moore with a concussion, facial contusions and a broken neck.

While hockey has always had a very physical element to it, these recent instances are startling examples of violence at the sport's highest level, and there is legitimate cause for concern over the trickle-down effect it could have on amateur hockey. But we can't pin all of the blame on the NHL. Now, more than ever, it is critical for decision makers at the youth level to take a hard line when it comes to violence in amateur hockey - no tolerance.

Farmington Hills, Mich.-based Suburban Sports Group, in cooperation with the Michigan Arena Managers Association, launched the "Respect the Game" campaign in October, in an attempt to get what should be a very simple message across: Players should show respect for opponents, parents, coaches, officials and facilities, because without these things, there would be no game to play. But we can't expect them to show respect unless they are led by the example of their parents, coaches and league administrators - not just their idols in the NHL.

Many of today's hockey players and fans came of age watching ESPN coverage of the NHL. While ESPN highlights the goals, they also like to bring attention to the big hits - some of which are clean, others that are not. Go to an NHL game in any city, and you are likely to find at least a few people banging on the glass and screaming profanities. For whatever reason, that has become acceptable in our culture. Where it should absolutely not be acceptable is the local hockey rink, yet on any given day, you could run into the same screaming "fan" at a youth hockey game. Only this time, he is screaming at his kid or the officials. Parental codes of conduct need to be established and enforced by the facility. If parents can't adhere to them, they should be removed from the building.

Coaches should be subject to a code of conduct as well. The goal of the coach should be to provide a fun and educational atmosphere for his/her players. Fair play and safety must be priorities. Telling a kid to go after an opponent in a violent manner, getting into an altercation with parents or other coaches, or treating any player with disrespect should have consequences.

While it would be nice to let the NHL take the fall for misbehavior in youth hockey, it just isn't fair. In the end, it is up to parents, coaches and league administrators to teach their hockey players right from wrong. Behavior encouraged on the ice should be no different than how a person should act off

the ice - with courtesy for others.

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