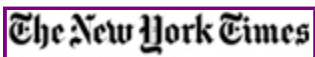


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## Slap Shot

News From the World of Hockey



February 5, 2011, 8:30 pm

# Researchers Evaluate Who Is Old Enough for Body Checks

By [JEFF Z. KLEIN](#) and [STU HACKEL](#)

The predominant opinion among researchers of serious injuries in boys' hockey favors pushing back the age for introducing body checking to 13, and USA Hockey [is considering that proposal](#).

But a few researchers are bucking the trend. One is the University at Buffalo's Barry Willer, who says introducing body checking at 13 actually increases the risk of injury for those players.

"I don't know any other research that has studied as many kids over as long a period of time as we have," said Willer, a professor of psychiatry and rehabilitation services who has worked on youth safety programs with Hockey Canada and USA Hockey and has 25 years' experience studying brain injuries.

Willer and his researchers tracked 3,000 youth hockey players in Burlington, Ontario, at all skill levels over five years, starting in 2002.

They found that when body checking was introduced for elite-level 9-year-olds, that group experienced an increase in injuries. But the injury rate dropped when they turned 10.

They observed the same first-year injury increase, followed by a second-year drop-off, when body checking was introduced for 11-year-old and for 13-year-old players.

"If USA Hockey passes the 13-year-old rule," Willer said, "three years later that first batch of 13-year-olds to experience body checking for the first time will have little or no experience in giving or receiving a check, at an age when there are big size discrepancies and a high level of testosterone."

"Based on our research, I estimate that 50 percent of those 13-year-olds will be injured at least once," Willer added. "And many of these injuries will be serious; i.e., fractures and dislocations and concussions."

Willer said that injuries sustained by 9-year-olds introduced to body checking were generally minor because of the players' small size. Since Willer studied those players in the first half of the last decade, Ontario raised the minimum age for body checking to 11, which is also the current minimum in USA Hockey.

The findings of Willer's research team [were published last month](#) in The British Journal of Sports Medicine and in [a 2005 paper](#) in the journal Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise. Willer also cited [a 2010 paper](#) published in the official journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics showing no

increase in overall rates of injury and concomitant neurotraumatic events among Ontario 9- and 10-year-olds in body-checking divisions.

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1.

Ken C

Gardiner, Maine and Shanghai, China

February 5th, 2011

9:38 pm

Sounds reasonable. I recall playing Peewee hockey at 11 and 12 years old, and not thinking anything about size disparity. It was at Bantams, 13 and 14 years old where you literally had some boys twice as large as the others. Certainly anecdotal, but it makes sense that learning the skill of bodychecking and how to receive a bodycheck should be learned at a pre-pubic age where size is more similar. The greatest difference in hockey I noticed growing up was in high school where the players all of a sudden seemed to carry their sticks around like sickles. I was taught to keep my stick on the ice, ready for a pass, so it was a very noticeable change.

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[2.](#)

Steve-0

Adirondacks

February 6th, 2011

11:13 am

If you want to reduce injuries, at all levels, the place to start is for referees to enforce the existing rules on a zero-tolerance basis. Get strict about calling penalties for boarding, charging roughing and the like. I agree with Ken - the incidence of "stick work" like cross-checking, slashing and hooking is much higher today than it was when I grew up playing and watching hockey.

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[3.](#)

Peter R

Cresskill, NJ

February 6th, 2011

9:24 pm

My bet is USA Hockey changes the rule. I've seen a lot of Bantam players that have a huge size and weight difference on other Bantams. Imagine playing flag football until you are 13 and then having to start playing full contact football. Uh-oh.

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## News of Hockey

### A Note to Readers

The News of Hockey column now appears in the **main body of the blog as a regular post**, allowing readers to comment on the post and other bloggers to link to it. Each daily post will be updated as appropriate throughout the day, expanding on existing items or adding new ones. Other regular posts like **The Morning Skate**, **European Puck** and **The Junior Report** will resume once the ice gets flooded later this month.

### About Slap Shot

Slap Shot, the New York Times hockey blog, reports on the Rangers, the National Hockey League and anything that glides quickly across a frozen surface anywhere on the globe, from the snowy prairies of Saskatchewan to the frigid steppes of Russia and beyond, like, say, Phoenix.

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