

In Youth Hockey, 'Checking' Ups Risk Of Brain Injury

by ALLISON AUBREY



Enlarge

Elise Amendola/AP

Youth teams play on an auxiliary outdoor rink before the 2010 New Year's Day Winter Classic NHL hockey game. New research shows that young players in leagues that allow checking are much more likely to suffer concussions and serious injuries than kids who play in leagues that ban it.

June 13, 2010

text size **A** **A** **A**

All contact sports introduce the risk of injury. But researchers say there's one move in hockey that can be mighty dangerous for young players: the body check. A new study finds 11-year-olds who played in a league that allows checking — using your body to block another player — are more than three times as likely to suffer concussions and serious injuries compared with kids who played in a league that bans checking.

Carolyn Emery of the University of Calgary, one of the researchers who conducted the study, said that if body checking were banned in her province — Alberta, Canada — "we'd expect to see 1,000 fewer injuries and about 400 fewer concussions."

In the study, which was published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Emery compared injury rates among hockey players in Alberta to those in Quebec, where checking is banned.

Typically many hockey leagues in the United States and Canada introduce checking at age 11. "But I think these findings are strong evidence to support the notion that perhaps the age at which body checking is introduced should be reconsidered," says Emery.

The American Academy of Pediatrics agrees. The group recommends limiting the practice of checking for all players younger than 15. The policy was drafted in 2007 after a report that concluded body checking accounts for 86 percent of all injuries that occurred during games played by 9- to 15-year-olds.

Top hockey leaders didn't seem to give much credence to the AAP recommendation. "We thought there wasn't enough data there," says Kevin McLaughlin, senior director of hockey development for USA Hockey, the national governing body for youth and adult hockey leagues that establishes the play rules.

McLaughlin says the new study published in JAMA adds more to the debate. "I think this new information will definitely play a factor with our board of directors and our district representatives."

The study has generated a lot of discussion about the right age to introduce body checking. There's also recognition that body size makes a difference. Studies show that smaller, lighter kids are at significantly higher risk than bigger players.

The Power Of A Body Check

In order to understand the power of a body check, look no farther than NHL replays. During a playoff game several years ago, Philadelphia Flyers player R.J. Umberger was slammed by Buffalo Sabres player Brian Campbell.

"Campbell just destroyed Umberger," one of the announcers boomed. In the stadium, the fans went wild, and on the ice a brawl ensued. Umberger looked up from the ice with a woozy look.

"It's a dramatic hit, and he looks like he got a concussion," explains concussion prevention researcher Barry Willer of the University of Buffalo, after watching the incident on YouTube.

Learning To Check Correctly

But Willer says despite these dramatic plays, the body check is integral to the sport. During competitive collegiate and professional games there can be dozens of body checks where no one gets hurt. But this takes skill. And it takes young players time to develop the skill.

"So when should the youngster learn to body check — and more importantly to take a check?" asks Willer. "That's the controversial issue."

Willer says he's not convinced that waiting to the age of 15 to introduce full body checking is the best solution. He explains there's a steep learning curve. And he says no matter when the move is introduced, injury rates will probably go up as players adjust to using it.

Willer's advice is to limit checking in all recreational leagues, and leave these intentional slams to the competitive players who are aiming to make a collegiate or professional career out of it.

Safety As The Bottom Line

The earliest that USA Hockey would consider any policy changes is next summer. In the interim, the group says it will continue to focus on educating coaches on the best ways to help players develop proper checking skills and prevent injuries.

"Our No. 1 priority is the safety of the youth athlete" says McLaughlin. "We don't want anyone getting hurt playing the game."

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Recent First



Jane A (meadowlark9) wrote:

Pardon me if I find many of the machismo stances voiced here more than a little revolting... children should be playing safe instead of trying to emulate a bunch of neanderthals being violent to stir up a crowd. I still love ice hockey, in spite of the fact that my youngest brother suffers to this day because of his love of ice hockey and the resulting blindness in one eye due to a "sticks" violation (which was urged on by the opponent's a-hole coach!!) When, oh when, will men act like grownups in front of their children?

Monday, June 14, 2010 5:19:34 PM

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Dustin Hannum (sgniwder99) wrote:

If anything, I think you could make the argument that checking should be introduced earlier. At younger ages, kids skate slower, weigh less, and have much greater flexibility. Two of the big things that kids have to learn when introduced to checking are the importance of keeping your head up, and how to maintain your balance through contact. The former can't be taught early enough (as the danger of head injuries should make immediately apparent), and the latter would be much easier for kids to learn when they're not getting hit by bigger, heavier, faster objects (other players).

Actually, Wayne Gretzky has advocated for this for quite some time. I believe the quote I heard from him was something to the effect of, "when you first start checking, learning how to GIVE hits as much is not as important as learning how to TAKE hits." If you wait until kids are 15 years old, 90% adult size, and skating 90% of the speed of adult players to introduce checking, that only gets more dangerous.

Monday, June 14, 2010 2:57:05 PM

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Dustin Hannum (sgniwder99) wrote:

There should definitely be more research done on this, because to just say, "11 year olds introduced to checking for the first time are getting head injuries, so we should up the age at which checking is introduced" seems knee-jerk and irresponsible to me, for one simple reason:

1. 11 years old is a time when the differences between childrens' development is starting to become fairly obvious. Some kids are growing faster than others, and some kids are developing greater athletic ability than others. All of a sudden, kids who have played together for years have a dramatically different element of the game introduced. The kids who are bigger, stronger, faster, and more skilled are naturally going to have a competitive edge over other kids, and this increases risk of injury. Wait until 12-14 to introduce checking, and that problem becomes more pronounced. Wait until 15 and the gap may lessen, but then you have a bunch of near-adults playing the game pretty quickly and trying to learn an entirely new and dangerous element. Terrible idea, in my opinion.

Monday, June 14, 2010 2:42:28 PM

[Recommend \(0\)](#)[Report abuse](#)**Dennis Paul (dpaul)** wrote:

Although hockey is the only sport to have a penalty box, other sports do have penalties where players are removed for a set time period. Lacrosse and rugby come to mind and I'm sure there are others.

In any case, this has nothing to do with checking, which is a legal maneuver along the lines of blocking and tackling in football.

Monday, June 14, 2010 10:20:09 AM

[Recommend \(0\)](#)[Report abuse](#)**A Clark (Psufencer)** wrote:

Actually, I can't think of too many sports that offer instant ejection as a penalty for something boneheaded and hyperaggressive. In hockey, yeah, it's two minutes, maybe five if something was really egregious--and the five minute penalties do come with automatic review by the league with the possibility of suspension. The authorities also have much more severe penalties in their pockets which can be, and are, enforced (misconduct, match penalty, penalty shot). You can really put your team in a bad spot through a lack of self-control.

In football, as I recall, you're penalized yardage. In racing, you're penalized time, or maybe laps. It's very uncommon for a driver to be "parked," say, for intentionally wrecking somebody else--the equivalent of a punch, I guess. Sure, in baseball the ump will probably just toss an offender, but there's no other "penalty" structure in baseball.

I have no idea what they do in basketball or soccer. These aren't sports I enjoy watching. Every time I see soccer, there's always somebody writhing on the ground like they've been shot, anyhow.

I'm similarly clueless regarding what the penalty for a thrown punch might be in boxing or martial arts competition. Perish the thought!

Monday, June 14, 2010 8:08:49 AM

[Recommend \(0\)](#)[Report abuse](#)**Adam Coffey (Adam_C)** wrote:

If that is the case, why is it the only organized sport on Earth to use a penalty box instead of instant ejection? That was more of a rhetorical question, because you and I both know the answer already.

Any way it is spun, the rules are in place specifically to allow for FREQUENT violence to keep the fans and money pouring in.

Sunday, June 13, 2010 11:51:39 PM

[Recommend \(2\)](#)[Report abuse](#)**Wolf Pack (ThisIsMyBoomstick)** wrote:

I hope that helps to explain a little Adam.

Sunday, June 13, 2010 11:47:38 PM

[Recommend \(0\)](#)[Report abuse](#)**Wolf Pack (ThisIsMyBoomstick)** wrote:

Adam,

Time out in a box because a player breaks the rules leaves the team with 1 less player for the amount of time. In hockey this can let the other team score 1 or 2 goals. These could be the only goals scored in the game, hockey is a low scoring game.

It pretty much causes the team to suffer because of the players actions. Plus they could end up losing the game because of those actions.

It is about the skill. But winning is the end goal of the game. And a player punching another player can cause his team to lose. It is a fitting punishment if you know the game. From the outside I guess it doesn't look like a fitting punishment. I can understand that, I used to think the same thing.

But this article is about the body check. Which is an important move to the sport. One that needs to be learned to do and to take in which every year matters.

Sunday, June 13, 2010 11:46:32 PM

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Adam Coffey (Adam_C) wrote:

I am still waiting to understand how breaking the rules and attacking someone in a hockey game only results in a time-out box instead of a multi-game suspension. It is supposed to be about the skill of the game and not violence, right?

Sunday, June 13, 2010 11:31:59 PM

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Wolf Pack (ThisIsMyBoomstick) wrote:

Nope, none at all. By the way Adam. Comparing hockey players to slaves forced to become gladiators isn't really a good comparison.

Sunday, June 13, 2010 11:24:20 PM

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