

USA HOCKEY – BODY CHECKING RULE CHANGE PROPOSAL

The proposed rule change will move the age of legal body checking in games from 12U to 14U.

HOW DID THE DISCUSSION BEGIN?

The body checking discussion is one that has been going on for a long time within USA Hockey. This is a complex and emotional issue and is being looked at from many angles. Although safety is obviously a huge concern, we didn't approach this initially from the safety side of the equation. We began by looking at how players develop their hockey playing abilities. Over the past two years we began to evaluate how Squirt and Pee wee skaters play and react in similar on-ice situations. We observed that Squirts tend to be more aggressive, and emphasize skills (skating, stick handling, passing and body position) in an attempt to make plays. The conclusion was simply that players at the Squirt level attempt to play the game in the correct manner. However, in the same situations many Pee wee players react differently. What was observed was that players at the Pee Wee level tend to either let the opponent get the puck first so that they can initiate body contact or they lay off so that they don't get hit. Although this may not be true for every player, we have found that it is common and prevalent at all levels of Pee Wee hockey throughout the United States. With this being said, we do know that physiologically (and most importantly), players at this age are in their prime "window of opportunity" to acquire sports skills. The current rules we have in place hinder our children from this acquisition of skills at the highest possible level.

WHAT ELSE WAS LEARNED DURING THE STUDY?

Although the original focus was not on the injury side of this issue, there has been so much medical research information brought forward that simply cannot be ignored. USA Hockey must always consider the health and safety of its players. There have been a number of recent studies (in Canada at the AAA level) showing that the serious injury rate at Pee wee is 4 times greater in checking vs. non-checking leagues. Of note is the fact that the injury rate between those same two groups is identical in practice (low).

What also came to light is the fact that cognitively, the 11 year old brain has not fully developed the ability to anticipate well. Anticipation is 50% of a player's ability to protect himself and avoid heavy contact that leads to these serious injuries. We realize there is should be contact in hockey; however, we do not want to place players into a situation where their cognitive skills are not yet fully developed to protect themselves. This is a function of brain development that players cannot "learn" by doing.

WHO ELSE WAS INVOLVED IN THIS DECISION PROCESS FOR USA HOCKEY?

USA Hockey's Body Checking Sub-Committee is made up of experts from a variety of areas. This includes people like Dr. Mike Stuart from the Mayo Clinic who is USA Hockey's Chief Medical Officer (all three of Dr. Stuart's sons have played in the NHL), Al McInnis, Mike Millbury as well as many others. USA Hockey has taken a very inclusive look at this issue.

WOULDN'T THE RULE CHANGE HURT BIGGER PLAYERS?

During the Pee wee years (11-12 years old), most male players are just on the cusp of hitting their adolescent growth spurt. This means that it is still to be determined who will end up being the bigger players in the long run. The player that has greater size and strength at Pee wee may end up being on the average or smaller side when everything evens out during the later teens. This means that players that rely on size and strength at an early age do not develop the necessary playing skills they need to be effective later on. Body contact and body positioning skills are far more important for a player to acquire at the Pee wee age and are the precursor skills to effective checking and playing skills as they get older.

What is BODY CONTACT vs. FULL BODY CHECKING?

It is not accurate to simply say USA Hockey is taking checking out of Peewees. The overall proposal is to increase the allowable body contact beginning at Mites and progress through Bantam when full, legal body checking would begin in games. As an example, the American Developmental Model (ADM) Red, White & Blue Hockey at 8U introduces the cross-ice environment to increase traffic and congestion and thus the associated natural body contact through simply reducing space.

The proposal would then increase the allowable body contact as player's progress through Squirts and Peewees. Competing at the puck, angling to gain possession or stop an offensive attack are examples at these levels. An important objective of this proposal is to eliminate the "Big Hit" in Peewees where players ignore the puck and try to 'blow up' an opponent.

Though not allowed in games, coaches will be asked to introduce and teach full body checking techniques in every practice during the two Peewee years. We believe this to be a better solution than what we often times see today as a single weekend "introduction to checking" clinic. The proposal is to provide players two years to acquire the necessary checking skills in a safer environment.

WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION?

You may check out the body-checking rule change proposal by Kevin McLaughlin, USAH Senior Director of Hockey Development and the other is by Brian Burke. <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/adm-seminar---chicago---2010>

WHEN WILL WE KNOW & WHEN WOULD IT TAKE EFFECT IF PASSED?

USA Hockey's Board of Director's, Council's, Committee's & Affiliate President's will be discussing all playing rule proposals at their Winter Meeting in mid-January, 2011. The USA Hockey Board of Directors will vote on the proposal in June 2011. If passed, the change would take effect for the fall 2011-2012 season.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE SPRING OF 2011 AT U12?

No change to spring 2011 hockey. The 2011 spring season will be played under the current rules & format since the proposal will not be voted on until June 2011.

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE PEEWEES GOING INTO THEIR SECOND YEAR?

Due to the nature of the two-year hockey levels, second year Peewees will continue to learn proper checking during their training sessions so they can better apply them in 14U Bantam games.