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### **Keep Fighting in the NHL**

On November 22, 2006, hockey fans attending the Atlanta Thrashers and Washington Capitals game were privileged to watch the emotionally charged contest turn into a game with 176 penalty minutes including 10 fighting majors with a little over a minute left in the game ("Game summary"). As a result, the attendance at the next game increased from the previous sub par level of 11,284 people to just over 15,000, fueling the debate about fighting and its place within the NHL. Since the inception of the NHL in 1917, fighting has always played a role in the sport but has seen a steady decline since the 1980s. Games like this one have caused fans, players, coaches, and the media to question the future of fighting in the sport and whether it innately and ethically belongs in the game. Many of the hardcore fans, myself included, believe that fighting is a crucial ingredient to the value of the sport.

What is considered a fight in the NHL? Typically, a fight occurs when two players from opposing teams square off with their gloves dropped in order for one player to avenge a bad hit or slash given to his star teammate by an opposing player. In the average fight, a player may get a split lip, black eye, or at worst a broken nose, but no serious injuries result since these fighters learn to protect their faces and are already outfitted with protective pads underneath their uniforms. "Under players' rules, fist-fighting in hockey is considered a form of sanctioned violence that is different than other unsanctioned violent acts like striking an opponent with a hockey stick. It works as a form of social control that has a moderating effect on other potentially serious unsanctioned violent acts between players" (Kerr 316). Aside from calls made by the

referees, fighting is a way to police events placed out on the ice during a game and has been happening in the league since 1922.

Those who believe fighting plays an important role in the game cite history, the unwritten code, and the attitude of the sport as reasons why fighting should stay. Since 1922, fighting has been a critical part of the NHL: "In 1922 Rule 56 was introduced which regulated but did not ban 'fisticuffs [fighting],' instead giving the guilty party a five-minute penalty rather than a suspension or expulsion. The owners saw how much the fans loved the violence and saw dollar signs" (Bernstein 4). While fans certainly appreciated the speed, skill, and finesse that hockey requires, they also found the hockey fights incredibly entertaining. As for the owners, they were running a business, and they did not want to disappoint their customers. One observer argues that for hockey fans a hockey fight can act as an avenue for psychological release, which helps explain why fighting is so popular among fans: "Fighting is a necessary release not only for players but also for the pent-up emotions of the crowd. Konrad Lorenz, one of the foremost experts on animal aggression, has written that catharsis can be achieved by the spectator as well as the player. Lorenz sees the cathartic experience as 'the most important function of sport'" (Jones, Ferguson, and Stewart 75). Fighting is such an emotional action that it can energize the crowd, jumpstart a slumping team, and even spur them on to victory in a game.

Fighting continued in the NHL and gained popularity well into the 1950s. At that time, the most well known player of the day started what became known as the Gordie Howe hat trick, which consists of a goal, an assist, and a fight. The owner of the Toronto Maple Leafs at that time, Conn Smythe, once sarcastically said, "We've got to stamp out this sort of thing or people are going to keep on buying tickets" (Miller and

Heika). It is in statements like his that show the role fighting has played in selling tickets and getting people into the arena seats.

Twenty years later in the 1970s, the Philadelphia Flyers intimidated the entire NHL with their incredibly physical play, which led them to be called the Broad Street Bullies (Bernstein 45). This team's style of play resulted in the league adding a rule called the "third-man-in-rule" to curb fighting by allowing referees to eject any third player from the game who enters into a fight (Miller and Heika). By the mid 1980s, there was, on average, one fight per hockey game (Allen). It was at this time that the number of fights peaked and since then has been steadily declining to its current low of three fights for every 10 games played (Singer). The NHL did not want to completely eliminate fighting, but the league wanted to reduce the number of fights per game, which is why it implemented these rules. The NHL also added another rule to help discourage fighting in 1992 when it created the instigator rule, which gives "additional penalties to a player judged to have started a fight with an opponent who didn't want to scrap" (Miller and Heika). The implementation of these rules has caused fighting to evolve over time and has required players acting as enforcers to become more complete players in order to keep their roster spot on the team.

By banning fighting, the league would lose a key component to its rich 89-year history. "Since day one when hockey started there's been fighting," said San Jose Sharks tough guy Scott Parker. "It's the aggression and competitiveness that's always been part of the game. It is part of the reason people enjoy the sport" (Lebrun). The current core base of fans support fighting in the NHL and see it as part of the tradition of the game. Therefore, the removal of fighting would result in a loss of fans in an already niche

sport. Proponents of fighting in the NHL also cite the unwritten code as reasons why it should stay within in the game.

“The code” is essentially the unwritten rules of fighting and retaliation in the NHL according to the book, The Code, written by Ross Bernstein. Assuming players abide by this code, fights will not result in serious injury and will help a team safely retaliate against the opposing team for wrongs done such as slashing a star player like Wayne Gretzky. Gretzky weighed only 180 pounds, which made him an easy target to obstruct by the bigger and more physical player. His team, the Edmonton Oilers, brought in two players, Marty McSorley and Dave Semenko, to act as his protection out on the ice. The Oilers went on to win four Stanley Cup victories in the 1980s because opponents were afraid to even touch Gretzky allowing him to perform at such a high level (Bernstein 51).

While owners may like hockey fights because they increase the entertainment value of their product, fighting also protects star players because they won't be intimidated to use the open ice and play at their high skill level. Atlanta Thrashers general manager Don Waddell told *USA Today*, “I am not a fighting proponent, but...my question is how do you eliminate it? Baseball has fights, basketball has fights, and football has minor fights. I don't think you can completely eliminate it, and I think it's dangerous if you try. I still think the fights keep some players honest” (“Pros, cons on eliminating fighting in the NHL”). Fights break out in baseball, a non-contact sport, so one can only stand to reason that there will be more fighting within a sport that has a greater level of physical contact such as hockey. On the other hand, some people believe that fighting can and must be avoided in order to protect the athletes.

Those who support the abolition of fighting believe it would increase the safety of the athletes and that the sport would finally become more than just a niche sport. While

the NHL has certainly had its ugly moments throughout its history, serious injuries from fighting have only occurred when a player chooses to disobey the unwritten code. For example when Vancouver Canucks player Todd Bertuzzi sucker punched Colorado Avalanche rookie Steve Moore to the side of his head, Bertuzzi completely ignored the code and crossed the line into unsanctioned violence. Bertuzzi was trying to avenge a previous Avalanche hit on his captain, Markus Naslund, that had knocked him unconscious. According to the code, Bertuzzi should have dropped his gloves and fought him face to face instead of attacking Moore from behind.

There is a line between sanctioned and unsanctioned violence, even in NHL ice hockey, and on this occasion Bertuzzi crossed that line. Still, if the circumstances had been slightly different (e.g. the players had been facing each other, or better still facing each other with their gloves off, or had Moore not been so severely injured), Bertuzzi might well have escaped punishment and subsequent prosecution. (Kerr 317)

Following the incident, everyone had an opinion on violence in the NHL. In a follow-up press conference, Barry Smith, the Detroit Red Wings assistant coach, said that the incident gave members of the media justification to claim that violence in the sport had gotten out of hand: "Everybody who is a non-hockey person and doesn't like the sport sees it as a sport that is outside the line and a game without discipline. The non-hockey people look at that incident as justification [that their beliefs are correct]. What he did is inexcusable to hit a player who can't see where the punch is coming from" (Detroit Red Wings). Non-hockey fans saw this hit as representative of the league when, in fact, it goes way beyond the code and against everything a hockey player believes. The Red Wings community relations manager, Anne Marie Krappman, added that it "gave the

league and the sport of hockey a real black eye" (Detroit Red Wings). Some feel that fighting gives the sport a negative connotation preventing the sport from expanding its popularity across the country.

Despite this detrimental outlook, attendance has not been a problem with the NHL. In an email interview with NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly, he applauded the high attendance rates by stating, "Last year [the NHL] broke our all-time record for League-wide attendance. This year's attendance, while down from last year, is up from any other year during our history. So attendance has never been better" (Daly). Historically, fighting in the NHL has never been shown to negatively impact attendance or television ratings. When the Colorado Avalanche and Detroit Red Wings had a bitter rivalry in the mid 1990s, their games received a substantial amount of television coverage and as a result generated greater interest in the sport. Daly also added, "Obviously, if we felt that our current penalties for fighting could be changed in such a way as to increase the appeal of hockey to the public we would change them. We don't believe that to be the case" (Daly). The NHL is not currently evaluating penalties and sanctions for fighting, which shows fighting has yet to be a serious enough problem to warrant an evaluation by the league. The NHL is using its resources to the best of its abilities in efforts to promote sportsmanship and to maintain the value of the game, while appeasing fans, teams, and the hockey league.

Additionally, the NHL would likely lose some of its core fan base if fighting were to be abolished. A legendary sports journalist Frank Deford once confessed,

When I go to a hockey game, I look forward to seeing a fight, and I enjoy it immensely when one happens. I know I shouldn't, but I do. It brings out the worst in me. Apparently this makes me a very typical hockey fan. The NHL won't

give up fights to please critics for the same reason that strip shows won't give up naked ladies. You gotta play to your constituency. (Bernstein 194)

A poll conducted by The Hockey News supported Deford's statement with 75% of those surveyed saying they liked or loved fighting in the NHL (Miller and Heika). In an article from Marketing, Wayne Karl asks if the NHL wants these types of fans "associated with this product, if these people are conducive to a long-term marketable demographic" (9). This concern has yet to present itself to the league since the NHL has managed to remain marketable throughout its 89-year history and is currently generating more revenue than ever before. Multiple studies have shown that attendance, a key source of revenue for a hockey team has a positive correlation with fighting in games.

A study by Rodney J. Paul published in the American Journal of Economics and Sociology found that "teams that fight more often tend to draw more fans" (360). The empirical results were found to be true for both US and Canadian NHL teams, while substantially magnified in the US cities. A more surprising result was that "fans prefer teams that win and have tendencies to fighting and violence, as opposed to high-scoring, low-violence teams" (360). A study published by Jones, Ferguson, and Stewart in the same journal 10 years earlier had similar results proving that fighting has maintained its importance and entertainment factor within the game for at least the past decade: "In the US the fan's perception that the more violent the game is likely to be ... the higher the attendance" (74). As a business, NHL team owners want to fill as many seats as possible in their arenas so a ban on fighting would likely decrease ticket sales and thus hurt the team financially.

Others argue that NHL teams wouldn't need players to act as an enforcer or protector if referees enforced rules to protect the star finesse players who score all the

highlight reel goals (Allen). Even with a crackdown on penalties by the referees, players can still find a way to sneak in a dirty play that is within the rules, but still prevents the star player from playing without intimidation. An enforcer or a tough guy on the team will fight to make sure this doesn't happen again, referees won't change this: "Rule changes in the game have phased out much of the original purpose of the role [of an enforcer], but haven't wiped it out completely. The players who fill that role now are generally more complete players than they were 10 or 15 years ago" (Singer). Shireen Saski is a television reporter for Fox Sports Detroit who covers both the Detroit Red Wings and Detroit Tigers. She also believes that a fair fight in hockey is a great aspect of the game and it is "like the checks and balances of the hockey world" (Detroit Red Wings). Allowing the players to police themselves can keep the game safer and more skillful.

Another popular argument against fighting is that if high levels of hockey can exist without fighting such as in the Olympics, World Championships, and the NCAA, why can't the NHL? A former NHL referee Bruce Hood agrees by saying, "People don't miss...(fighting) in the Olympics, playoffs or world championships. Nobody would miss it in the NHL" (Miller and Heika). During playoffs and big games like the Olympic tournament, fans don't need fighting for entertainment value since there is already so much tension because of the championship at stake. However, the NHL season is 82 games long and fighting helps make the games more entertaining and interesting during the long season. Additionally, the teams can't afford to get a fighting major or game misconduct because of what is at stake (ie. Stanley Cup or Olympic gold medal), but in the regular season a fight might not even have an effect on a win or a loss.

While the days of one fight per game are certainly gone, fighting should still have a place within the game even if it has a more evolved role. Aside from a penalty shot, the only time the entire crowd at a hockey arena gets up is for a fight. Fights generate energy in the crowd and can provide a swing in momentum for the winning team. As long as hockey players and coaches follow the unwritten code, fighting will only help the league attract new fans and maintain the level of competitiveness and physicality within the sport.

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