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Facial Safety in the NHL

On February 24, 2006, a deflected puck hit American Hockey League (AHL) defenseman Jordan Smith in the eye. Surgeons were unable to save the damaged eye, which was cut, ending the defenseman's promising career and consequently Smith now wears a prosthetic (Higgins). In addition to the eye injury, Smith also suffered multiple orbital bone fractures (Wykes). This career ending injury resulted in the AHL requiring all of its players to wear a partial visor. The National Hockey League (NHL) is now the last of the professional or junior leagues in North American to offer its players a choice in regards to whether or not they wear a partial visor. The only proven way to lower the number of serious eye and facial injuries among NHL players would be through a league-wide mandate requiring players to wear at least partial visors.

With the speed and skill of the game improving every season, eye and facial injuries have become bigger problems among NHL players. Over the past six years, marquee players like Steve Yzerman, Mats Sundin, Al MacInnis, and Bryan Berard have all suffered major facial injuries while they were not wearing a visor or mask. These athletes' injuries consisted of detached retinas, torn corneas, broken orbital bones, and a torn iris, which all can harm the athlete's vision. The *British Journal of Sports Medicine* cites a case report by D S Morris reinforcing the dangers of playing hockey without facial protection: "Playing hockey with no protection carries about a seven percent risk of injury to the eye or face every season" (2). Similar results from a Mayo Clinic Study prompted the USA Hockey program to require all of its under 18 players to wear full facial protection and for its players over 18 to wear at least a half shield or visor (Aase).

Historically, NHL players have always provided resistance when it came to wearing additional safety equipment like helmets and goaltender masks. For example in the 1974-1975 season, 43 minor league hockey players were blinded ending each of those players' careers (Biasca et al. 4). Yet it still took four years before the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) required all of its hockey athletes to wear full facemasks (Biasca et al. 5). The NHL is facing this same resistance for player safety, but this time around athletes are opposing visors and not helmets.

Over a span of 30 years ending in 2002, the Canadian Ophthalmological Society "registered 1,914 eye injuries in ice hockey, with 311 cases of blindness" (Biasca et al. 13). These serious eye and facial injuries result in the end of a season or even career, which can cause financial instability for the athlete's immediate family. "When you have kids at home, you decide life would be better with my eyes than without them," Detroit Red Wings head coach Mike Babcock said to the *Detroit News* after one of his players got hit in the face by a puck (Kulfan, "Hit an eye-opener for Draper"). Additionally, the player's teammates and organization can also face negative consequences as a result of the injury. Team general managers and owners have to pay higher insurance premiums as well as save extra room in the salary cap in case of a season ending injury. An athlete's injury can potentially negatively affect his family and his team in a variety of ways.

The only proven way to lower the number of serious eye and facial injuries among NHL players would be through a league-wide mandate requiring players to wear at least partial visors. This change in policy would result in a significant drop in facial injuries. Aside from the benefits of a healthy athlete, the financial situation for team owners and general managers will improve when the medical insurance premium drops.

"ECHL and United Hockey League teams found that requiring visors reduced their medical insurance premiums" (Wykes). The NHL is a business and it may take medical costs as well as medical insurance premiums to bring about a visor mandate.

Many NHL players don't currently wear visors because they believe it places them at a disadvantage. A common excuse given by players is that visors decrease their ability to see the ice and thus harms their performance. However, 38% of NHL players already wear a partial visor, a number that has increased from 24% over the last five years. Some of these players include the top athletes in the league, which shows that their level of play has not been harmed by wearing a partial visor ("38 percent of NHLers wear visors"). A study conducted by the *Canadian Journal of Ophthalmology* found that protective eyewear does not adversely affect vision components such as acuity, contrast sensitivity, and color vision. The study also found that the central 30-degree field of vision is barely depressed by the hockey visor (Ing et al.). Every NHL player had to play in junior or college leagues that required either partial visors or full facemasks so these players have played at successful levels with appropriate protection to make it into the league.

When Detroit Red Wings captain Steve Yzerman was hit in the eye by a puck, the team lost its leader in a critical time during the second round of the 2004 playoffs. The Red Wings ended up losing the playoff series and Yzerman's career almost ended, but a four and a half hour surgery was able to save his vision. After his injury he told the press, "Sitting in the hospital that night, I really wished I'd been wearing a visor." He now supports the concept of mandatory visors after he had no trouble adjusting to the partial visor (Kulfan, NHL players re-examine the importance of wearing visors"). Many players maintain that it should be a personal decision to wear a visor or not and should

not be a requirement set by the league. However, should the players get a choice when improper equipment may result in teams suffering financially when important NHL players get injured and miss the rest of the season or even have to end their careers? There is too much at stake for the player, his family, and his team for him to not wear a partial visor.

Other players fear a loss of respect from their peers if they were to wear partial visors. Hockey is typically seen as a macho, testosterone driven sport where every weakness is targeted and a visor would become a weakness. NHL players used to hold these same beliefs regarding helmets, but the NHL culture no longer holds that stigma and sees it as a vital piece of safety equipment. Once the NHL requires its players to wear a partial visor, the stigma towards facial protection should change as well. University of Toronto medical graduate Dr. Rob Devenyl told *Varsity Sports* that he believes that a league-wide mandate is necessary.

I think until they're [visors] made mandatory – just like helmets eventually became mandatory – probably a majority [of players] for whatever their reasons, will still continue to not wear them...[It's] unfortunate. There's no other injury you can so reliably prevent with the proper equipment. (Brennan)

While wearing a half visor won't totally eliminate all eye and facial injuries, the rule would certainly reduce the amount of injuries, most of which are easily preventable. The NHL needs to take a step towards proper safety to protect its players and finances by mandating players to wear at least partial visors. Their players will not wear the appropriate safety equipment even after seeing fellow teammates go down. For example, many Toronto Maple Leafs players wore visors after teammate Bryan Berard

went down with an eye injury in 2000, but the athletes stopped wearing them after a week of the incident. The league must require its players to wear at least partial visors for the safety of its players because the athletes won't do it.

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