

# Hitting can wait: Shanahan

BY MATTHEW COUTTS, POSTMEDIA NEWS AUGUST 25, 2010

For many, body checking in youth hockey is a frustrating debate that pits concerns for children's health against a parent's desire to have a son start the climb to an NHL career at the age of eight.

On Tuesday at the World Hockey Summit, Brendan Shanahan, who played 21 seasons in the NHL, had a simple response to those who want body checking introduced to young players at a younger age.

"Don't do it," Shanahan said after a panel of doctors, coaches and former NHL players discussed the matter at the summit.

"I always had a dream of playing in the NHL," Shanahan added later, "but I don't think my parents ever made any decision that was steering me toward that direction. They never put me in harm's way to try to obtain that."

Shanahan, now the NHL's vice-president of hockey and business development, points to his experience and that of former NHL defenceman Bryan Marchment.

Shanahan played minor hockey with Marchment in a league that had banned hitting. Both made it to the NHL -- and Marchment became one of the most feared hitters in the league.

"He didn't have body checking when he was a kid. He turned out to be a great body checker," Shanahan said. "A very, very small percentage of these kids are going to make it to the NHL or even play at the collegiate level, so I think player safety and skill development is more important."

A recent University of Calgary study by Dr. Carolyn Emery, cited Tuesday by Mark Aubrey, the International Ice Hockey Federation's chief medical officer, found that allowing body checking between 11- and 12-year-old players drastically increases the chances of injury.

Observing 74 teams in Alberta, where body checking is permitted, and 76 teams in Quebec, where stricter rules ban hitting until 14 years of age, Emery found nearly three times as many injuries in checking-permitted leagues.

"How many kids give up hockey at the tender age of 11, 12 or 13 when body checking is introduced because psychologically they are not ready, and they are scared?" Aubrey said. "They lose confidence rather than gaining confidence in who they are."

Others aren't buying it.

In a study published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine, a group of researchers from the University of Buffalo followed 500 Burlington, Ont., players between four and 18 years old and found 66 per cent of injuries in junior leagues come from accidents and not deliberate hits.

More to the point, a professor from the University of Regina recently stated injuries stem from poorly executed hits and suggested it was better to teach the skill at a younger age.

"How you introduce the skill is far more critical than when you introduce the skill," Harold Riemer, an associate dean of kinesiology, recently told Postmedia News. "Associations need to be far more proactive than reactive about the issue."

Most hockey associations across Canada allow hitting at the peewee level, when players are 11 and 12 years old. Quebec does not permit hitting until the bantam level (13 and 14 years old).

Aubrey would like to see the rest of Canada fall in line with Quebec.

Shanahan, meantime, said that children should start playing for the love of the game, not as a step toward fame.

"Let them dream about the NHL, but that is not the reason they should be playing hockey," he said.

National Post

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