

Don't drop bodychecking age, Shanahan says

Former NHL star says his parents never put him at risk while he chased his dream

BY MATTHEW COUTTS, POSTMEDIA NEWS AUGUST 25, 2010

For many, bodychecking 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 bodychecking introduced to 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. Marchment became a feared hitter, although some would argue he sometimes played outside the rules.

"He didn't have bodychecking when he was a kid. He turned out to be a great bodychecker," Shanahan said of a notorious NHL player who was suspended several times for infractions that included knee-on-knee hits. "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 bodychecking between 11- and 12-year-old players drastically increases the chance of injury.

Observing 74 teams in Alberta, where bodychecking 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 bodychecking 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, University of Buffalo researchers followed 500 Burlington, Ont., players between four and 18 and found that 66 per cent of injuries in junior leagues came from accidents, not deliberate hits.

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