

NHL tough guys don't have a fighting chance against brain injury

By John MacKinnon, Edmonton Journal March 5, 2011



In this file photo, Jared Boll #40 of the Columbus Blue Jackets fights with Trevor Gilles #14 of the New York Islanders.

Photograph by: Mike Strobe, NHLI via Getty Images

EDMONTON — As the evidence about brain trauma mounts, it's reasonable to assume some NHLers are beginning to understand the diminished state that awaits them in retirement from the sport they love.

Those that are not in denial, that is.

Even among those who grasp the long-term risks to brain health from head shots, some assume early onset dementia won't happen to them.

Others accept their Faustian bargain: they may live a shortened, or profoundly compromised life, but a glamorous, wealthy one while the National Hockey League getting is good. They're fine with that.

For me, since former National Football League defensive back Dave Duerson texted loved ones to donate his concussion-damaged brain to science, then killed himself with a gun blast to his own chest last month, the question has been when the NHL will have a similarly dramatic moment.

It came this week when Boston University researchers announced that tissue from the brain of late NHL tough guy Bob Probert showed evidence of Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, a degenerative condition already found in more than 20 deceased NFL players.

It is fair to say that the work by Boston University's Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy, and reporter Alan Schwartz of the New York Times, has pressured the NFL to make rules changes to up the safety ante in a sport that, like hockey, brings inherent and inevitable risks.

The NHL has been taking similar action, including implementing Rule 48 prohibiting blindside headshots.

The inherent disconnect in the NHL, though, is and has always been fighting, a festival of headshots that often causes concussions, such as one suffered last week by Edmonton Oilers defenceman Theo Peckham.

Fighting is celebrated, fighters venerated in the NHL, which still assesses five-minute majors to the fighters.

Probert's NHL fights numbered 246 over a 16-year career. He had a sense his brain had been damaged during his NHL career, which is why before he died last July from heart failure at 45, Probert asked his wife, Dani, to ensure researchers examined his brain.

So, now, the Boston University researchers have found evidence of CET in the brains of two NHL players, both fighters, Probert and Reggie Fleming. This is troubling, but hardly surprising.

Nor is it surprising that some voices in hockey reflect the disconnect when it comes to fighting.

"I want to make this perfectly clear: Did I have a concussion from fighting? Probably one or two, yes," ex-Oilers tough guy Marty McSorley told the New York Times this week. "But I had more from playing.

"You can't point at fighting and say that's the cause of concussions in hockey."

For some in hockey, the position is that if the tough guys know the risks, and are engaged in a 'bout' between two willing combatants, well, that's fine.

In other words, if an untalented player's only chance at earning big bucks in life comes from fighting in hockey, and if he accepts the risk that, like Probert, he may show signs of dementia in his early '40s if he pursues that job description, well, the rest of us are off the hook morally and we can all just sit back and watch the boys throw 'em. Great fun.

Contact sport is fraught with risk, obviously. Researchers have found, for example, that football players are at significant risk of suffering concussion in practice, let alone games.

But much of the head trauma in hockey comes from activity that is against the rules: blindside hits; elbows to the head; stick fouls; and fighting, which is, as was noted, a major foul.

It would be naive to believe all risk of head trauma and early onset of CTE could be removed from hockey by strictly enforcing the rules. But it certainly could be reduced.

The cultural blind spot for hockey, though, is fighting, such a beloved, honourable thing to do, so manly, not to mention entertaining.

Now, the brain tissue of Fleming and Probert are Exhibits 1 and 1A of what may await those who throw 'em for their livelihood and for our amusement.

And what immediate impact has this new information had? Precious little.

Former Oilers tough guy Jeff Beukeboom, whose career was ended by a sucker punch by Matt Johnson, and who spent more than two years recovering from the post-concussion symptoms, wouldn't change a thing, he said this week.

"The game's been great to me," Beukeboom told the Toronto Star. "Talk to me in 20 years. If there are any repercussions, maybe I'll have a different answer.

"But I doubt it."

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