

Coaching Articles

To Check or Not to Check?

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Several interesting and very informative viewpoints on checking were expressed last week in Hockey Talk. From a coaching / instructor's perspective, I wish to throw "my two cents worth" into the discussion arena.....here's a little food for thought?

During the past year, there has been a great deal of discussion , debate and confusion over the potential implementation of body checking at the Atom hockey level. During last year's Canadian Hockey Annual Meeting the decision was made to permit provincial branches to introduce body checking at the Atom level if they so choose. At the grass roots level, the Calgary Minor Hockey Association was proactive on this subject matter (i.e. had meetings and discussions within the City leagues and Community Associations) and the majority consensus was to implement Body Contact into the Atom Division. However, the Provincial Association (i.e. Hockey Alberta) decided at their Annual Meeting to delay the implementation of contact in Atom and review the issue again prior to the 2003 – 2004 season. As a result, the City of Calgary's Atom level did not have body contact this season.

What is the main purpose of checking ? To embarrass or intimidate a player on the ice , to entertain fans with a great hit , to cause injury to one's opponent....no of course not! The main purpose behind checking is to gain control of the puck!

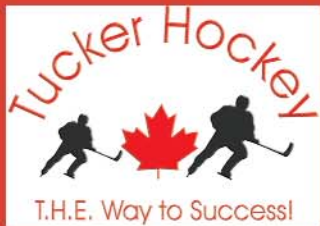
The objective of the game of hockey is to control the puck, to make plays, to create scoring chances, to score more goals than the opposition, to win hockey games and to ultimately "enjoy" the greatest sport on earth. Often in the Canadian hockey system too many players and too many coaches forget there's a puck on the ice! Personally, I value a "good goal" over a "good hit" any day of the week!

When thinking of implementing checking at the Atom level, there are many issues / obstacles to consider such as:

- the age change this yearAtom players are now younger 9 & 10 rather than 10 & 11 years old....we may loose kids who do not want to hit from competitive minor hockey?
- the growth and development stage of players at this young age level....we need to avoid serious injuries and concussions....weight differences between players may vary upwards to 50 pounds?
- the lack of continuity between the national, provincial and local minor hockey associations...obvious from the rulings / decisions of the past year?
- the lack of concrete facts and scientific research studies supporting or condemning the checking idea....appears to be a great deal of uncertainty of who is right?
- the lack of professional coaches within the minor hockey system who can properly teach body contact / checking to the players....many European countries such as Russia, and Germany have professional coaches... rather than parents.... who teach the fundamentals of the game?
- the constant turnover of volunteer coaches each season within the hockey system... who often lack the background to teach checking properly..... who often receive too many demands and too high expectations from parents...often its very unrealistic to expect a parent /coach, who has never coached before, to take a weekend

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coaching course and properly learn to teach what they know?

Personally, I believe the whole “checking philosophy” in our country needs to be re-examined and altered. From the initial stages of a young player’s development, our hockey system teaches the fundamentals of skating, passing, puck control and shooting. However, in the past we introduced checking at the Pee wee age level and now the debate is focused on the Atom age level.

Suggested Recommendation:

Why not implement “body contact” clinics at the Novice level, allow “body contact” at the Atom and Pee wee levels, implement “body checking” clinics at the Pee wee level, and allow “body checking” only at the Bantam age level ?????.

In order for this checking approach to be implemented properly, the Canadian hockey system will have to adjust its current philosophy and approach....all levels of hockey (i.e. National , Provincial , and Local Associations) need to get on the same page, more in depth studies have to be conducted, better education and accountability from coaches , refs, officials and administrators are required, more professional coaching resources and tools must be available to assist volunteer coaches to learn and incorporate the proper checking progressions into their team’s practices.

The following outlines many of “key teaching points” and “progressions” required to teach checking properly.

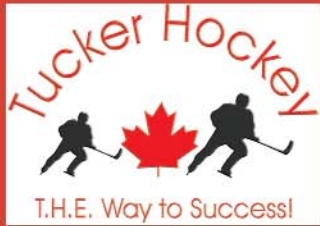
When teaching checking properly a player must be introduced to and have functionally mastered the “basics of skating “which includes: edge control, balance, stops & starts, turns & pivots and overall agility. Many minor hockey coaches cannot teach the most important skill in hockey i.e. skating!!

There’s a basic “four step progression” associated with teaching the art of body checking :

- 1) Position / Angling – the ability to force an opponent to go in the direction a player wants his /her opponent to go. A player requires controlled skating and balance, feet apart, head up , stick on the ice, inside shoulder to his/ her opponent’s outside shoulder, need to read the degree of puck control by the opponent (i.e. contain or pressure), defensive side positioning, check inside to outside, eyes on the defenders chest and angle the opponent to the boards.
- 2) Stick Checking – the ability to angle and adjust the speed of approach, have inside shoulder to opponent’s outside shoulder, requires good timing...need quick hands...practicing sweep, poke, stick press, stick lift and hook checks.
- 3) Body Contact – a defensive tactic, to block the path of an attacker, to get in the way of an opponent, and good angling to direct the player to the boards....leading to “body contact / confidence”. It’s so important for a player to be confidence on his / her skates (i.e. good balance / strong on his /her skates) and execute body contact.
- 4) Body Checking – the foundation is to “respect your opponent”, to read the play (i.e. good gap control), proper execution depends on skating ability, steering and the proper approach angle (i.e. read / react) , good

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body positioning (i.e. elbow, arms, and stick down, wide skate base and knees are well bent).

There are several “ Checking Never – Evers ” which include:

- 1) Never cross check an opponent into the boards
- 2) Never push / trip an opponent into the boards
- 3) Never carry your stick up in the air
- 4) Never use the butt end of the stick
- 5) Never hit a player from behind (i.e. reason for the stop patch on jerseys)
- 6) Always respect your opponent - (i.e. play safe - the golden rule)

Be aware of the “danger zone” (i.e. along the boards within 3 to 4 feet)....stay close to the boards...know where your opponents are....use your hands and arms as a cushion...keep your head up...turn your body so your shoulders hit first...don't turn your back to an opponent!

In conclusion, if at an early age (i.e. Novice level) players are taught a strong base of skating , position / angling , stick checking and body contact (i.e. get in the way of an opponent) their motor memory skills will be developed / improved and progressive steps will be made towards later years..... when body checking is implemented at the proper level i.e. bantam!

Educated and concerned readers may express their comments regarding this article, or make inquires about upcoming “ Tucker Hockey ” - Power Skating programs & / or Checking clinics at tucker_hockey@hotmail.com.

P.S. Play hard...play smart...play to win...play to have fun...but always play safe!!

Yours in Hockey,

Coach Rex

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