

## New body checking rules spur polarizing reactions

By Jeff Doner

For years, body checking has been introduced to players at the peewee level in the Ontario Minor Hockey Association.

But that was swiftly changed at a recent Hockey Canada general meeting, where the decision was made to move body checking from peewee to bantam for the upcoming 2013-14 season.

"The game of hockey continues to evolve and we have to change with it," said Dave Garinger of OMHA Development. "Ultimately, our goal is to provide the very best programming for all of our members while creating a safe and enjoyable environment in which to play the game."

This decision has come on the heels of a recent move by the Ontario Hockey Federation and the OMHA to remove body checking from all divisions of house league and house league select hockey for the 2011-12 season.

"For the OMHA, education will remain a priority focusing on the 4-Step checking progression, which begins the first time a young player steps on the ice," read the statement. "Moving forward, we will need to clearly define the differences between body checking and body contact."

The decision, while touted by many as progress, has also met its fair share of criticism as well.

Paul Wolanski, going into his eighth year as a coach in the Aurora Minor Hockey Association, said he would have preferred the age actually by lowered to atom as opposed to being raised to bantam.

"I disagree with the ruling," said Wolanski, who has an extensive background in hockey including being drafted by the NHL's New Jersey Devils in 1991.

"The reason I disagree, is that as the kids get older and moving up to bantam age, you're going to have a larger disparity in the size of players. For example, you can have a kid that is 90 pounds taking a body check from a kid that's 140 pounds for the first time. The size differential and the speed of the game as the kids get older could cause more serious concussions. Players are not going to learn to play with their head up."

Wolanski is of the opinion that if you teach kids at a younger age, there is less force behind the hits as the game is slower most players are roughly the same size.

However, he also said that he wished the league grandfathered the change in and that coaches should have been given the heads up.

"I'm a coach where my players were able to hit last year, now they can't hit this year," he said.

Peter Sawyer, a third-year head coach of the peewee A team in Aurora, had mixed reviews of the decision as well.

"I understand what they are trying to do; because it's not going to completely go away," he said. "There's going to be hitting in the game of hockey. So I'm sort of mixed with it. If it's taught right, you could probably start hitting right from the beginning. The problem is when you get up to bantam, midget and junior A, there's hitting. It's not going to go away and where do you stop with it and where do you begin?"

On the flip side, Sawyer said he was also somewhat excited about how the change will affect his smaller, more skilled team.

"We played a team last year in Detroit and it was non-contact and it was really good hockey. We won it in the finals against a team in Detroit and they had never hit. So we learned on the fly how to do it," he said. "It's going to be faster, I think it's going to be an exciting brand of hockey actually."

Both coaches agreed that it should be up to the players and their parents as to whether or not they want to play in a division that has body checking and that there are options in house league and select if they choose.

"If you don't want to hit, play house league. There are options," said Sawyer.

Despite the concerns of some, the OMHA is steadfastly standing by their position.

"We recognize that there are varying opinions on this subject which can be quite polarizing," said Ian Taylor, OMHA director of development programs. "If the introduction of body checking at a later stage of player development will accomplish these goals then we certainly support it."

For second-year peewee teams, the change to hitting, from not hitting, to back to hitting in bantam, will be an interesting transition, but both coaches are convinced it won't take much for players to get the hang of things.

"There is going to be an adjustment period, but I don't think it's going to be that significant that it will change things that much," said Wolanski.

Added Sawyer: "The fact is they are 12 years old, they'll adapt to it and it'll be great hockey."