

## What's Pro Hockey got to do with world peace?

*Stand on guard for kids and the game we love*

Raffi Cavoukian

You might wonder—pro hockey & world peace—what's this about, is he nuts? Well, maybe. But considering the NHL hockey violence often in the news, and hockey analyst Don Cherry's repeated tributes to Canada's Afghan war dead within "Coach's Corner" on CBC's Hockey Night In Canada, I could examine the militarization of Cherry's segment and the loss of respect for Canada as a peacemaker in the world. But I won't. I will, however, question the role of violence in Canada's fall-winter-spring passion and what that says about this country. I believe it's a lack of imagination that keeps our beloved game unchangeable in the minds of violence proponents. Canada, we're better than this. We're peacemakers.

The focus on rough & tumble hockey takes its toll: NHL teams are plagued with a rash of injuries, their player rosters get depleted and miss star players. Recently, concussions have knocked out some top NHL players, none more so than Sidney Crosby who's been out for months and is not slated for return any time soon. With all due respect to Canada's military families and their undoubted sacrifice, there's a strong case to be made for letting a game be a game, and restoring Saturday NHL telecasts to "hockey night" in Canada. Not fight night, goon night, or injury night. Not politics night. *Hockey* night.

When even NHL commissioner Gary Bettman admits that "sports is a microcosm of society in general," then why do we condone NHL violence that would, anywhere else, result in arrests & jail time? What does this say about pro hockey, and about our society?

Within the last year, with four deaths of NHL tough-guy "enforcers"—tough guys paid to provoke a fistfight to intimidate opponents—one might ask, what's thuggery got to do with hockey? Aren't there other ways to outdo the competition? Outwit them, for example?

Hockey is a kids' game turned into fierce contest by professional athletes, and at the NHL level it's a tough, high flying, contact sport. Fast skating and booming shots make for exciting play, but they also bring injuries from pucks, sticks, falls, unavoidable collisions as well as body checks. All the more reason, in my view, to limit injuries to just that—the unavoidable accidents—without prompting players to harm one another in the name of toughness. That's just stupid, and dangerous. It maims, and can kill.

Cherry has called for rule changes that might reduce injury: notably re-instituting the centre red line to slow the speed of the game, a return to lighter shoulder pads for skaters, and no "headshots" or body checks from behind. That's fine. But then he confuses the issue

by glorifying hockey violence in many other aspects. His repeated insults at players (especially Europeans) who won't fight or aren't rough enough for his taste is unwarranted. Graceful players from Lafleur to Gretzky to Lemieux and Bure, have been tops in their game, and their skills deserve only respect. The Sedin twins are exemplars of hockey sportsmanship, all too rare in today's game; they also happen to be among the game's top scorers.

But Cherry's 23 "Rock 'Em, Sock 'Em" videos reinforce his preference for grit over grace. That's a false choice. (He's as wrong on this as he was on the Iraq invasion.) To glorify rough play as Cherry continues to do harms the game and its players, and it harms our nation's impressionable young. Besides, anyone knows that to make it to the NHL level, you have to be tough. So it's illogical, and a form of bullying, to question a player's manhood by his style of play. It's also an insult to the growing number of girls and women who now play hockey—with great skill and heart.

We can design for a better outcome. We can remake the game.

We need a change in pro hockey culture and the minor leagues that feed it. A ban on fighting, as Ken Dryden has rightly urged, won't lessen the drive to win. But to remove fighting, you've got to start young and stay consistent through the various leagues on up.

Hockey Canada could design a "Smart Hockey" culture right from the start. For thousands of kids, parents and coaches in hockey at rinks all across the country, Smart Hockey could emphasize skill, grace, and sportsmanship, instilling adversarial respect in the youngest players right up to the junior leagues. Imagine that!

Remaking the NHL into an exciting and entertaining brand—devoid of violence—may sound unthinkable to some; perhaps it's a matter of national will. For all those who contend that a fight ban would decrease the fan base, there are scores of fans turned off by the violence who might be happy return to the game. True, there's the US market and the huge TV revenues that go with that, and you'll hear the dubious claim that US fans demand fighting. Yet nobody complained that the 2010 Olympic Hockey series lacked excitement.

And here's a critically important question: is pro hockey all about money? Should it be? Do we value money more than our kids? Don't they deserve the best we can give them, to have positive sports models? Aren't these the kind of questions Canadian fans, and Americans, should be asking themselves?

A pro hockey spring won't happen overnight, but the seeds can be planted now.

Imagine an NHL whose referees call all infractions by the book—the rulebook!—as they do in World Cup soccer, the NBA, baseball, and football. Consistent officiating is the backbone of a sport's integrity. And that's what we need in pro hockey: refereeing by the book. Break the rules and you're penalized, you hurt your team. Fight and you're out. A goalie slashes a

skater, he's out. In recent years the NHL rightly clamped down on hooking & grabbing; the same can apply to cheap shots, after whistle cross-checks and intimidation. Our game *has* changed, and it can change again.

Imagine a hockey culture of respect: one that balances the grit, valour and determination it takes to win with a focus on skill, grace, and sportsmanship. What hockey family wouldn't choose that? Why not go for the glamour of the high road? Why not be known worldwide for *this* brand of hockey?

Pacifying the game would have tremendous positive impacts for Canada's hockey families, officials, and the fans. Come on Canada, we can do this. Stand on guard for our kids, and for the game we love. For a smart hockey culture and a society that loves its young.

Canada, we can be peacemakers—on and off the ice.

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