"Stewards of Ice Hockey":
A Historical Review of Safety Rules in Canadian Amateur Ice Hockey

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Much has been written about the violent nature of ice hockey and the need to make it safer. Perhaps the most telling evidence of its violent or unsafe nature were reports of spinal cord injuries in the 1980s and 1990s. The medical profession was so concerned about the problem that representation was made in February 1983 to the board of directors of the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association (now the Canadian Hockey Association). Changes to the playing rules and an education campaign were undertaken to target this problem. The medical profession was not the only agent of change. Increasingly violent acts leading to severe injury attracted the attention of courts. Knowledge of this legal activity has sensitized players, coaches, administrators, and parents of the need to control the more violent acts in the game. Politicians, on occasion, move to the forefront as external agents for change.

While external agents of change are important as supplementary monitors of how members of society perceive the health and vitality of the sport, internal agents, namely, the executive members of the branches of the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association (CAHA), are the real stewards of safety for the sport. The executive members discuss ideas for change offered by their constituents, and they forward motions for rule changes to the Rules Review Committee of the CAHA, which comprises the chair of the CAHA rules committee, the branch presidents, and the referee-in-chief for the CAHA. This committee grants or denies the motions. Approved motions for rule changes are presented at semiannual meetings of the CAHA’s general assembly for approval or rejection. These internal agents

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and this process are key to how safely the game is played. Their collective decisions for rule changes define the character of the game and reflect perceptions and attitudes about the level of violent and potentially unsafe behavior in the sport.

This paper is limited to an examination of selected facility and player behavior rules to gain insight into the historical nature of ice hockey and the quest to make it safer. While player equipment changes are important, they are not covered in this paper. Our work is divided into three sections: Seeds of Safety (pre-1919), Real “Old Time Hockey” (1919–45), and Getting Serious About Safety (1946–96). During the Seeds of Safety period ice hockey was very regionalized, relatively unorganized, and focused on defining the game’s objectives along with participation rules. Only embryonic safety rules existed. The dawn the Real “Old-Time Hockey” period saw the game take a national focus, adopting and delineating a standard set of participation and player behavior rules, including the legitimization of body contact. The Getting Serious About Safety period represented an explosion of rules and regulations that more clearly defined safety aspects of the game while at the same time made interpreting and applying rules even more difficult.

Seeds of Safety (Pre-1919)

This section of the paper covers the period prior to 1919, when the focus was on defining rules of play and developing and expanding organized competition. Only embryonic attention was given to safety rules. Antecedent to exploring safety rules, it is important to trace briefly the origins of ice hockey rules in general. Determining when the first set was written is the corollary of trying to establish the birthplace and birth date of ice hockey. There are numerous accounts of ball and stick games of various types being played in North America in the eighteenth century. There is also evidence that both the New York Dutch and the New Englanders were playing a game called hockey in the colonial period, and hurley, an Irish game played with sticks, was played in Nova Scotia in the early nineteenth century. Referred to as the “Halifax Rules,” as recounted by James Powers of the Halifax Herald in 1937, a list of twelve rules was used in the mid-1800s in Nova Scotia. The ice hockey game played outdoors by the Royal Canadian Rifles in Kingston, Ontario, in 1855 used definite rules fashioned mostly after those of field hockey. However, in mid-1860s Kingston, Ontario, the game—identified as “shinty or shinn(e)y”—was played by throngs of men on the harbor ice, without rules or referee and with only one objective: to knock an object, usually a ball, through a goal or past a boundary, or for an individual to rag the ball or retain possession for as long as possible.

Whatever mayhem prevailed when masses of recreants chased after the “puck” on outdoor surfaces, creating an indoor game for spectators and the formation of organized leagues conceivably led to a greater need