

Violence and racial slurs on the rise in kids' hockey

Analysis of league data shows shocking rise in physical and verbal abuse in GTHL

Robert Cribb Staff Reporter
and Lois Kalchman Special to the Star
Published On Sat Dec 05 2009



GTHL referee Carl Friday remembers when a 16-year-old hurled the n-word at him before threatening his life. Only a week earlier, the same slur had been used in an NHL game. In each case, there was a three-game suspension. (Nov. 22, 2009)

TONY BOCK/TORONTO STAR

Racial epithets screamed at opposing players, vicious hits to the head, blatant attempts to injure and coaches threatening officials with violence.

Welcome to minor hockey night in the GTA.

Never-before-published records on critical violations in the Greater Toronto Hockey League reveal troubling undercurrents in youth hockey.

During the league's 2008-09 season, players as young as 13 were assessed a dramatically increasing number of penalties for "discriminatory slurs" from insults about sexual orientation to players calling their opponents offensive racist terms.

League records also reveal startling cases of violence on the ice committed by repeat offenders.

Some teenage players have drawn dozens of major penalties over their minor hockey careers, including repeated offences for spearing, checking to the head, checking from behind, physical abuse of an official and spitting on opponents.

In most cases, they serve short suspensions before returning to the ice.

Experts say anti-social on-ice behaviour in minor hockey is rooted in deeper social problems – from stresses at school or at home to overly aggressive coaches and imitating National Hockey League heroes.

"This is about the way society is going," says John Gardner, president of the GTHL, the largest and most competitive minor hockey organization in the world, with about 500 teams and 8,000 players.

"We don't tolerate it in minor hockey. ... It's still a damn good game. The benefits still outweigh the problems."

Still, those problems are a growing concern among league officials, parents and coaches.

"The level of intensity has turned the arena into an unusual place," says Pat Flatley, a 14-year NHL veteran who played in the GTHL in the early '70s and now coaches the league's Toronto Young Nationals minor peewee AAA team.

"There is gossip, innuendo, backstabbing and a place for taunts."

The *Toronto Star* examined league data on 6,500 major penalties last season as well as 122 investigations by the GTHL into its most serious incidents, in which officials filed formal reports that led to suspensions.

The investigation found:

There were more than 475 penalties last year for checks to the head in the GTHL – a third more than a year earlier.

Players as young as 11 are suffering concussions serious enough to have lasting health effects and end their hockey careers.

Coaches and players lashing out at officials with verbal and physical abuse, including head-butting and death threats.

A tenfold increase in discriminatory slurs over the past three seasons.

The GTHL's own internal research into on-ice incidents, obtained by the *Star*, shows many of these problems are getting worse.

Consulting firm Justplay Sport Services Inc., hired by the league to poll officials after each game between 2005 and 2008, found the conduct of players, coaches and spectators had "worsened" and officials' dissatisfaction with the state of the game had increased.

League on-ice officials have assessed about 6,500 major penalties over about 10,000 games during each of the past two seasons.

Some of the most serious penalty categories have risen.

In the 2006-07 season there were only nine penalties called all season for discriminatory slurs. Two years ago there were 47. Last year, 96.

Complaints about racial taunting suddenly took a leap about two years ago, says Scott Oakman, the league's executive director.

In response, the league issued a directive to officials and clubs to be "on notice" about racial comments.

"Socially, this is unacceptable," he says. "With the nature of our demographics, we have an obligation to address it."

League investigation reports into discriminatory slur incidents read, at times, like racist pamphlets.

In a January game of Midget A 16-year-olds, a Toronto Avalanche player lined up for a faceoff in the offensive end when the game official heard him call the opposing goaltender a "dumb f--- Jew," says a league investigation report on the incident.

It was the aggressor's 14th major penalty between 2005 and 2008 including five for disputing officials' calls (one with added verbal abuse of an official), checking to the head, checking from behind and two for inciting.

He received a three-game suspension – the league's standard response to the offence.

In another case, last November, a 14-year-old AAA member of the Mississauga Reps disparaged an opposing player this way: "Shouldn't you be out blowing up buildings or something?"

The verbal aggressor had 15 major penalties since 2003 and was suspended for three games.

Referee Carl Friday, a 27-year veteran of the GTHL, remembers when he heard a youngster direct the n-word at him in 1997, and it reverberated like an echo.

Only a week earlier, NHL player Chris Simon of the Washington Capitals had called then-Edmonton Oiler Mike Grier a "nigger" during an emotionally charged exchange on the ice. (Simon was suspended for three games and later made an abject apology to Grier.)

While public debate over the Simon-Grier incident was still raging in the media, a 16-year-old hurled the identical epithet at Friday before threatening the black referee's life. As with all such cases, the league handed out the standard three-game minimum suspension.

It's hardly a sufficient deterrent, Friday says.

"I would like to see a five-game suspension," Friday said. "With a three-game suspension, it is like, 'So I get a weekend off. Big deal.'"

The Ontario Hockey League imposes an automatic five-game suspension for racial slurs.

Kevin Weekes says the GTHL should go even further.

An NHL goalie for 11 years, the former Toronto Red Wing in the GTHL says the racial harassment he suffered in tournaments as a black youngster was never appropriately penalized.

He recalls parents of opposing players at one tournament yelling the n-word at him as he stood on the ice. In some cases, a chorus would grow as young players joined their parents in the chants.

A three-game suspension is no remedy, says Weekes, who now works as a television commentator.

"It should be 10 or 15 (games)," he says. "We pride ourselves for being a multicultural city but we ... still tolerate this behaviour."

The GTHL's Oakman says the league does issue longer suspensions in some cases.

But increasing the mandatory minimum beyond three games would be unfair, he says.

"There are degrees of discriminatory language. When you increase (the minimum suspension), the lowest common denominator moves up."

The fact that a penalty for discriminatory slurs even exists speaks to an "insidious moral fibre within the social fabric that extends to the sport environment," says Dr. Bill Montelpare, a sports researcher at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay. "This behaviour is intolerable in society; the hockey arena is not exempt."

Of the GTHL's approximately 300 officials, fewer than a dozen are visible minorities, say league officials.

Racist language in minor hockey doesn't always come from players on the ice.

A non-Italian linesman claimed a parent called him a "f---ing wop" and a black referee who disallowed a couple of goals said the parent told him to go back to basketball and football.

Retribution examples:

League investigation reports reveal striking examples of on-ice rebellion targeted at officials:

In a January 2009 under-21 AAA game between the Humber Valley Sharks and the East Enders Ticats, a player stepped out of the penalty box and "head-butted" the official, the report says.

Remarkably, the player had 51 majors since 2002 for fighting, inciting, obscene gestures and disputing officials' calls.

In the third period of a game of 16-year-olds between the Hillcrest Summits and the Toronto Aeros in November 2008, a Hillcrest player left the penalty box, made direct eye contact with an official and "threw his shoulder into my collar bone area."

"He used significant force stopping my forward motion. There is no doubt in my mind that this was intentional. He was upset at the original call. This was not a slight brush by, I could feel minor pain in my collar bone area for approximately 10 minutes after the incident."

It was the player's 18th major penalty earned between 2004 and 2008, including three for disputing officials' calls, three for fighting and two for inciting.

Like the majority of those nabbed for such conduct, the league assessed him a seven-game suspension.

At the conclusion of a game for 14-year-old bantam AA players in September 2008, linesmen were directing players to their respective benches when a Mississauga Hornets player tried to incite a fight by flashing a middle finger at opposing players.

"The linesman put his hand out in an effort to stop (the player) from going to the North Stars' bench. (He) slapped the official's hand down and proceeded to his bench. Coaches from the following game reported that (the player) was heard further accosting the officials as well as making threats against the officials' lives."

Minor hockey referees fear for game, own safety

Increased threats, verbal and physical abuse against officials called 'disgusting'



Coach Pat Flatley says pressure to get to the NHL sets stage for explosions. (Dec. 4, 2009)

TARA WALTON/TORONTO STAR

When a Toronto teen lifted his stick and took a baseball-like swing at an opponent's leg during a minor hockey tournament in January, it was only the warm-up act.

Enraged by the resulting penalty for slashing, the 16-year-old turned his temper at the referee in the kind of anti-authoritarian outburst that has many officials concerned for the game and, in some cases, their own safety.

The player spun around, skated at the official and "cross-checked him in the chest," says a Greater Toronto Hockey League report on the incident. "(It was an) attempt to injure."

The *Star* gained exclusive access to 122 such reports into the GTHL's most serious on-ice incidents last year.

They revealed a disturbing pattern of growing racism, hits to the head and referee abuse.

Like many aggressors penalized for abusing officials, the player who cross-checked the referee had a long record of misdeeds.

Since 2002, the player had accumulated 18 major penalties, including six for checking from behind, two for checks to the head and two for disputing the call of an official.

He was given a seven-game suspension for the cross-check.

"What I see today is a lack of respect for the game, for players and no respect for the referees," says Stan Butler, a coach currently with the Ontario Hockey League's Brampton Battalion. He spent decades in the GTHL, junior hockey and with Team Canada Juniors.

"In the GTHL, I see kids getting into tussles with linesmen. I see kids disputing with the referees and slamming their sticks. ... It's disgusting."

There were more than 1,100 major penalties assessed in the GTHL last season for varying degrees of outbursts against officials.

That's an instance every 10 games.

There was an increased incidence last season of several serious penalties dealing with official abuse.

There were 226 calls for "harassment of an official/unsportsmanlike conduct" – up from 65.

The league conducted six investigations last season into "threatening an official" incidents, up from two the year before.

Add to that a dozen calls of "physical abuse of an official," 200 "verbal abuse" of officials, and more than 650 cases of disputing officials' calls.

At least some of those problems have nothing to do with hockey, says GTHL president John Gardner. The ice is merely the forum where deeper social problems play out, including troubles at home and frustration at school.

"Hockey provided the stage where the spark ignited," Garner says.

Others believe hero worship of rough-and-tumble NHL players inspires disrespect for officials.

"Patterns do form from the way the pro game is played," says Brian Coles, chief referee for the GTHL. "All these kids want to be at the pro level. It is monkey see, monkey do."

In a survey done the league of 62 of the league's top under-17 players last year, all but 12 said they fashion their play after the pros.

Youthful defiance could also be an expression of on-ice anxiety. Asked if there's too much pressure placed on young hockey players, about half the respondents answered yes.

Among the listed causes were "parents with unrealistic expectations"; "coach telling you need to perform for the scouts," agents and getting drafted into the Ontario Hockey League.

Nearly half of respondents said they had endured intimidation tactics including "verbal attacks," "physical intimidation," "trash talking" and "chirping."

"They all want to go to the NHL," said Pat Flatley, who coaches the GTHL's minor peewee AAA Toronto Young Nationals after a 14-year career in the NHL.

The pressure to get there, often intensified by coaches and parents, can set the stage for on-ice explosions, he says.

"The kids feel that pain but then it's the coaches (in the dressing room) and the parents in the car." When things go wrong, says Flatley, there is a deeply held tradition in hockey: Blame someone else.

"It's not the refs. Some nights, you just need to look in the mirror."

Still, the refs are often scapegoats.

During a November 2008 game of 15-year-olds, officials broke up a fight between two players.

One player "began to swing his fists at me and in the process hit me once in the chin, once in the helmet as he tried to break free to start another fight," says a league investigation report.

"There was a clear attempt by (the player) ... to hit me out of the way as to instigate another encounter with the opposing player."

The fist thrower had seven major penalties between 2005 and 2008, including two game ejections and five for checking from behind.

"We get what we tolerate," says Paul Dennis, who worked for the Toronto Maple Leafs in player development for two decades and is now a sports psychologist teaching at the University of Toronto and York University.

"The penalties are clearly not severe enough and, therefore, we've built up this crescendo of players losing it (their self-control) because they're allowed to."

Like Gardner, he says there are social factors beyond the rink that prompt such misconduct.

"We're in a downward spiral with some of these children. It started somewhere before it got to this abhorrent behaviour on the ice. It started with parents, teachers, coaches. But as long as we continue not to stop it, it's going to fester."

Officials aren't the sole targets of on-ice rage.

League records show numerous attempts by players to injure opponents.

Problem parents

It isn't just angry teenagers that officials have to worry about on the ice. Sometimes, parents of those hormone-driven teens can be worse.

Brian Coles, chief referee for the Greater Toronto Hockey League, says he'll never forget the night his life was threatened by an angry parent. In a midget AA game in 1999, a hulking father disgruntled by a penalty call against his son lashed out.

"He threatened to kill me," Coles recalls. "I was scared until the police showed up. He was scary. He had a bulky jacket on and who knows what he had under the jacket."

In a 2002 incident, police charged a man with assault after a melee erupted in the stands at a GTHL tournament.

A year later, a parent was banned from all league games for the season after physically confronting a coach.

Crackdown urged on head injuries

Hits to the head spark much debate in hockey where younger players may be the most at risk

Robert Cribb Staff Reporter
Lois Kalchman Special to the Star

Published On Mon Dec 7 2009



Justin Rizek loves hockey but he stopped playing after suffering his fourth concussion in the past two seasons in the GTHL. "It feels like your brain jiggles in your head," the 13-year-old recalls. (Dec. 2, 2009)

LUCAS OLENIUK/TORONTO STAR

Justin Rizek's hockey career is over.

He is 13.

After four concussions over the past two seasons in the Greater Toronto Hockey League, he has decided to hang up his skates out of fear.

"These days, kids are trying to kill each other," he says. "I was scared."

The first few times the eighth grader's skull was smacked against the glass, he saw stars. On a couple of occasions back on the bench, he threw up.

Sometimes, the 4-foot-11, 95-pound centre would take a break for a few days or weeks to heal before returning to the game he loved.

Then, in August, a fourth and final hit sent his head ricocheting against the ice. He blacked out. Eventually, he got to the bench in a dizzying fog.

"It feels like your brain jiggles in your head," recalls the former minor bantam AA Etobicoke Canuck.

"It's like a dream. You're in space and can't think."

His mother Lori-Anne would later say he appeared "delusional."

While she knows her son loves hockey – always the first on the ice and the last to come off – she now calls the sport "vicious."

"We were told (the concussions) could affect him for the rest of his life."

The head has captured the heart of the hockey world.

Cringe-inducing head shots at the junior and professional levels are triggering vigorous debate about hockey violence and its impacts on adult skulls.

But data obtained by the *Star* show youth hockey is also struggling to contain ferocious head hits that threaten hockey's most vulnerable brains.

There were more than 400 penalties last year for serious checks to the head in the GTHL that warranted a minor-plus-10-minute penalty. That's double from one year earlier.

Add to that another 71 checking-to-the-head penalties that triggered major penalties plus a suspension and two more head-checking incidents that prompted league investigations.

A penalty related to head injuries – "checking from behind" – was assessed more than 2,300 times last year, far beyond any other offence. The previous year, officials called the penalty more than 3,000 times.

"The magnitude of the problem shown by that data is more than I had anticipated even though I see these kids every week in my office," says Dr. Charles Tator, a Toronto brain surgeon who has specialized in hockey-related head injuries.

"The sheer number of times kids are hitting each other to the head really bothers me."

No one is sure how many players in the GTHL – the biggest competitive minor hockey league in the world with more than 500 teams and 8,000 players – suffer serious injuries because of all of those head shots.

The league requires concussed players to submit a physician's letter clearing them to play before they return to the ice. Two years ago, 51 such letters were filed with the league. Last year there were 55. There have been 22 so far this season.

But those cases are likely the tip of the iceberg, league officials admit, because so many go unreported or undiagnosed.

Anne Hunt, who managed last season's North York Knights minor peewee AA team in the GTHL, said seven players on her team of 11-year-olds – nearly half the team – suffered medically confirmed concussions.

"There is no doubt some kids are out to hurt somebody," said the occupational therapist.

The story is the same with the Etobicoke Canucks organization, where two 13-year-olds have been told by doctors never to play hockey again. Another is waiting to hear if he'll ever return.

An 11-year-old Canuck is just back from concussion and two 12-year-olds and two 14-year-olds are also out with concussions.

"It's cutthroat beyond anything I've seen before," said Canucks general manager Elinor Gillespie, who has been in minor hockey for 28 years.

"I've had more kids going down from concussions than from H1N1. There is no respect anywhere now. If their kids are not getting enough ice time, their parents will do anything to destroy whoever they deem to be in the way of their getting what they want – coaches, whomever. It's scary."

In a GTHL survey of 62 elite under-17 players last season, four indicated they suffered concussions or head injuries caused by either a "hit to the head" or a "hit from behind." GTHL president John Gardner says league officials are responding vigilantly to dangerous hits to the head.

"If a player is seriously hurt as a result of a serious penalty, that player has to sit out as long as the player he injured. It's been done."

But some question whether it is being done enough.

Corey Noyek, an 18-year-old who ended up in hospital twice after suffering serious concussions as a GTHL player, says his aggressors got off easy.

In one case, he was hit from behind at the blue line. "I went into the boards head first. I was light-headed and disoriented ... nauseated and traumatized and saw stars," the lean, 5-foot-9 defenceman recalls.

The checker got a four-minute penalty.

"I was out for a month or two," Noyek says. "I had post-concussion syndrome and was feeling like I was on drugs for a couple of months. I would be sitting in class and was dazed out. ... I was traumatized."

His father, Steven Noyek, a long-time coach in the GTHL, said his son was one of five players on the team that year who suffered a concussion.

He believes the GTHL's typical four-game suspension for major hits from behind or to the head is insufficient.

In the Ontario Hockey League, such infractions draw a five-minute major, game misconduct and an automatic review by the league.

"I think you should get 18 games (half a season) for the first hit (to the head) and the second hit, you are gone," says Noyek. "A few kids may sit out a year but you will save a lot of kids from a lot of problems."

Even some on-ice officials would like to see the league levy longer suspensions.

Veteran referee Nick Mintsopoulos watched a 15-year-old Don Mills Flyer slam a Mississauga Rep "violently into the boards."

The teen lay motionless on the ice for nearly a half-hour before being removed on a stretcher by ambulance staff in November 2008.

On a violence scale of 10, this was a 9, Mintsopoulos wrote in his incident report.

"I was contemplating calling the game," he recalls. "Seeing a kid leave the ice on a stretcher not knowing what will happen is pretty scary. You just think, 'That was someone's son that just got hit from behind.' It's life-changing."

Nonetheless, the player's father seemed less concerned when he came on to the ice to check his son.

"As (the player) was on a stretcher and leaving the ice, his dad said, 'He'll be ready for the third period.' I said 'What?' I couldn't believe it. It was just weird."

The Flyers player received the minimum four-game suspension for the incident.

"That kid could be out for a season while the kid that put him out may only be out for two weeks tops," says Mintsopoulos, who manages game officials for the Mississauga Hockey League as well as refereeing GTHL games.

Sports injury researcher Dr. Bill Montelpare says hockey is far too lenient when it comes to head violence.

"We've been destroying hockey because we allow this stupidity. It's a culture problem. You have to teach the coaches how to teach the game properly, that head hits aren't allowed and that when people get concussed, they're going to be affected for life."

Neuroscientists agree the still-developing brain of a teen is more susceptible to trauma than the adult brain, making the long-term risk of head hits even more serious at the minor hockey level, says Tator, who has given seminars to GTHL coaches on reducing head shots.

"Seeing that volume of penalties makes me feel that we should be doing more on the prevention side. We have to change the culture so that hits to the head and hitting from behind are not only not tolerated but aren't part of the game."

A *Star* review of 122 of last season's most serious infractions – those that triggered a league investigation – reveals several stories of brutal hits to young heads.

In one case, mere seconds after the puck dropped in a game of 16-year-olds last January, everything stopped.

A Toronto Eagle, pressing the Vaughan Rangers in the first round-the-boards puck chase of the game, checked an unsuspecting opponent "violently head first into the boards," says the GTHL report into the incident. "There was no opportunity for the Vaughan player to defend himself and the force of the impact was serious enough to have caused significant and permanent injury."

The Ranger lay motionless for several seconds.

"All the parents did that gasp," recalls Todd Clark, the referee who worked the game and has the image still burned in his mind. "Then, it's quiet. Everyone was thinking, 'My God, this kid might have just died.'"

Clark feared the teen's neck had been broken. "He was crushed into the boards. There was no reason for that degree of violence, especially that early in the game."

The Ranger player was eventually assisted off the ice by teammates and taken to hospital.

The checker had amassed 10 checking-from-behind penalties since 2001 and 18 major penalties overall during that time. He was suspended for four games and put on probation which signals that a similar incident in future will trigger a more lengthy suspension.

Such penalties pale in comparison with the lasting injuries that can be caused by head hits.

Dr. Paul Echlin, a sports medicine physician in London, Ont., studies head shots in hockey.

"People who deny concussions in hockey should come spend the day in my office and see kids and their parents suffering in silence.

"There can be a constant inability to function in life – inability to get out of bed, exercise, inability to go to school and sit in a classroom, inability to bear bright light, constant headaches. It's horrible."

Lucas Hauer knows that horror.

"I have a very bad short-term memory now," says the 18-year-old Hauer who suffered two concussions as a GTHL player. He missed three months of school and remains in physiotherapy two years after he stopped playing hockey.

"I had an overall fogginess, balance problems and sometimes my head spins when I close my eyes. ... I wish I would have broken my arm, my leg or even my femur – something that would heal."

Violent incidents in the GTHL

Examples of head shots from GTHL records:

With the Humber Valley Sharks 16-year-old midget A hockey club trailing the Toronto Aeros 2-0 in September 2008, frustration had set in.

Lining up his opponent, a Sharks player leapt forward at the head of an unsuspecting Aero.

"(He) took a direct hit in the face and fell to the ice with (the Sharks player) falling on top of him," says a GTHL investigation report into the incident. "The referee observed that (the Sharks player's) skates left the ice as he lunged."

The Aero was taken to hospital with a suspected concussion, one of potentially hundreds suffered by young hockey players in the Greater Toronto Hockey League each year.

In a November 2008 under-21 AAA game, a check from behind by a Leaside Kings player sent his Humberview Huskies opponent face-first into the boards. He came to rest on the ice with a face full of blood, recalls official Dwayne Cromwell.

"It was targeted from behind," he recalls. "Anytime someone hits the boards without getting their hands up, we're very concerned."

It was the checker's seventh checking-from-behind penalty since 2000 and his 13th major penalty overall. The league assessed him the minimum four-game suspension.

During a AAA game of 15-year-olds last September, a player on the North York Rangers body checked an opposing Junior Canadiens defenceman after making "no attempt to slow down," says a league investigation report.

"The degree of violence was high and the defenceman's head bounced off the glass causing an injury."

The injured player was taken by ambulance to hospital with a sore neck and a suspected concussion, the report says.

In a game of 12-year-olds this past January, a Hillcrest Summit player hit a Ted Reeve Thunder opponent in a full-speed rush for the puck without warning, says an official's report.

"It was one of the most severe (checks from behind) I have been involved with," he wrote.

The Ted Reeve player was hit in the spine or neck area and sustained an injury, it says.

In March, a 13-year-old minor bantam AA Hillcrest Summit player was on the receiving end of a check from behind compliments of a Scarborough Young Bruin that left him lying on the ice for 10 minutes until a trainer could have him removed.

Unprepared for the "violent" check, the player's "head went straight into the boards," says the incident report. "(The player) was in a lot of pain, screaming, yelling, holding his head and rolling around on the ice."

The Young Bruin received a four-game suspension.

A member of the under-21 Mississauga Hornets had finished serving his third minor penalty of the game and "was looking for trouble" last December, says a league report.

"He came from the penalty bench and hit the first opposing player he found. He struck him in the head with a considerable amount of force. It was a dangerous and vicious hit to the head of an unsuspecting player."

It was the aggressor's 16th major penalty since 2001, including infractions for fighting, checking from behind, checking to the head and inciting.

He was given a four-game suspension and probation.

