

# Time has come for NHL to put an end to fights on the ice

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Chicago Tribune · 23 Feb 2023 · By Sheldon Jacobson Sheldon Jacobson is a professor of computer science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He employs his expertise in datadriven, risk-based decision-making to evaluate and inform public policy.

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The NHL has a culture problem.

It oversees the only professional sport that condones fighting during games among its players, so much so that extracurricular fights are part of the game's identity, its DNA. Case in point: It has a designated major penalty for fighting because fighting has always been prevalent.

The time has arrived to stop such egregious endorsement and end fighting for good.

Skill, rather than fights, has served other professional sports well, with fights during games frowned upon. Other sports leagues have instituted policies that address and deter fighting, using combinations of suspensions, fines and buy-in from teams and players. The NFL and the NBA have zero-tolerance policies when players engage in fights.

The NFL oversees what most would regard as the most physical professional sport, yet fights among players are rare. The simple reason is that a legal hard tackle can accomplish much more damage than a punch. The NFL takes a shared-responsibility approach, with fines used as a last resort. Player and team buy-in is a critical component of such deterrence.

The NBA game is very physical, with hard fouls a frequent occurrence. Yet fights remain somewhat rare, even when tempers rise, as referees are quick to call technical fouls for any behavior that could spawn a fight, with fines and suspensions given out. They also take a no-fault approach, so anyone involved is subject to penalties.

Dugout-clearing brawls do occur in the Major League Baseball, often when a pitcher's brush-back pitch gets too close for comfort. Though the baseball commissioner's office does not explicitly forbid fighting, the frequency of fights remains remarkably low. Baseball is also a more deliberate, nontimed sport, in contrast to football and basketball, which use time and speed as factors for success.

In the NHL, fighting has historically been tolerated as part of the game. The idea of an "enforcer," whose role is to intimidate other players to ensure smaller teammates aren't harassed on the ice, still exists.

The Gordie Howe hat trick — a goal, an assist and a fight in a single game — is emblematic of how fighting has been a part of the game for decades.

It is time for the NHL to enter the 21st century and end such behavior.

When hockey players engage in fighting, they besmirch the sport and devalue it in the eyes of some of the public. Our society has already become more violent over time. Tolerating fighting among highly compensated professional athletes is not entertainment; it is an embarrassment. So what can the NHL do to stop the fighting?

First, stop treating fighting as a major penalty and follow other professional sports leagues: Use ejections, suspensions and fines to deter such behavior.

Let's start with the following policy: If a player instigates a fight, he is done for that game and the next two games, with no pay. His team also gets a two-minute minor penalty for instiga-

tion. If the instigator cannot be determined, both players get the same penalty. Each subsequent fight in the same season would double these penalties.

With repeat offenders penalized ever more harshly, the benefit of unskilled enforcers on rosters would end. The NHL's Rule 56 on fisticuffs outlines policies like this, yet they rarely get enforced.

If a fight broke out in a public venue, law enforcement would be called and the participants would be questioned, with some possibly charged. Yet when a fight breaks out during a hockey game, the transgressors are given a five-minute major penalty. This double standard does not serve professional hockey well, effectively perpetuating the image of the hockey troublemaker. All professional sports have a physically aggressive component. This is the nature of competition at the highest level, when players seek to achieve peak performance and win. It also brings out emotions that can be difficult to rein in.

Every professional sport understands this and takes the necessary steps to mitigate misdirected behavior, creating a safe environment for players and spectators. Yet pro hockey, whose rules suggest the league does not support fighting, implicitly creates an environment in which fighting may not be explicitly endorsed but is tacitly tolerated.

An upgrade in policies about fighting, with better rule enforcement and buy-in from every team, would be an important and necessary first step to sunset the proliferation of fighting. The good news is that the trend in fighting has been declining. This means the final nail in the coffin is ready to be delivered.

The time to do so is now.