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December 13, 2011

Elbow, shoulder pads under scrutiny in bid to reduce NHL head injuries

By DAVID SHOALTS
From Wednesday's Globe and Mail

Equipment should 'defend the wearer, not offend the opponent,' doctor says

With the NHL's biggest star, Sidney Crosby, and leading scorer, Claude Giroux, out indefinitely with head injuries along with at least 25 other players, the league's concussion problem is worse than its leaders like to admit.

While medical experts and others are calling on the NHL to introduce more severe penalties for all hits to the head and for fighting, the players' equipment remains an issue. The NHL and the Canadian Hockey League, which is made up of the three major-junior leagues across Canada, are using softer elbow pads and shoulder pads but it is not known for sure if this is making a difference in the number and severity of head injuries.

An NHL executive said Tuesday the league is working to make shoulder pads, which were softened and reduced in size by the start of the 2010-11 season, even smaller. Critics have long complained shoulder pads are so big and hard that they act as body armour in big hits, leaving many players concussed.

Crosby is back on the injured list just eight games after he returned from a concussion as the result of a blow on the head from an elbow pad. Giroux was concussed when a Philadelphia Flyers teammate, Wayne Simmonds, accidentally hit him on the head with his knee pad. Many of the other concussions on the NHL's injury list were caused by shoulder hits to the head.

Kris King, the NHL's senior vice-president of hockey operations, said even though the league and the NHL Players' Association mandated soft-cap elbow and shoulder pads, with at least half an inch of padding over any hard plastic caps, over the last several years, and reduced the size of the shoulder pads, efforts are continuing to make the shoulder pads smaller yet. The NHL made soft-elbow pads mandatory in 2003 and did the same with shoulder pads for the 2010-11 season. The CHL introduced them this season as part of a strategy to reduce concussions.

King said the NHL's statistics show the number of concussions from blows by elbows to the head is "enormously reduced" since 2003. However, he said the statistics for those hits plus shoulder hits to the head that result in concussions will not be made public until the NHL's annual general managers meetings in March.

CHL president Dave Branch and Ron Robison, commissioner of the Western Hockey League, both said they will not have suitable statistics about the effect of the softer pads on head injuries until later in the season.

Dr. Charles Tator, a neurosurgeon at Toronto Western Hospital and a leading expert in concussions, said the NHL and other leagues need to keep working on the elbow and shoulder pads.

"We should be changing the elbow pads and the shoulder pads so they go back to what they were meant to be," Tator said. "They defend the wearer, not offend the opponent."

The NHL's equipment modifications are being overseen by Brendan Shanahan, the senior vice-president of hockey operations and player safety. He will give the NHL general managers a report in March, and King said if the NHLPA agrees, the smaller shoulder pads could be in use by the start of next season.

While many of the hard plastic caps on the elbow pads and shoulder pads in use now were eliminated or covered by softer padding, King said the league is testing a prototype now from equipment manufacturer CCM that has "very limited hard plastic. The rest is different grades of foam."

King said the new shoulder pads are being tested in games by 12 players and they are "slimmer, more streamlined." The league is also working with other manufacturers and expects more prototypes to be available soon.

"It's an area we're continually monitoring and trying to get to where we used to be before equipment got big," he added. "We want to aggressively work with the NHLPA on this."

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