

Head Games

It's no secret that concussions are front and center in the world of sports.

The Canadian Journal of Neurological Sciences says the reported concussion rate in the NHL has more than tripled in the last five years compared to the previous decade. Now, bigger, faster players and harder boards could very well reflect this rate, but maybe it's more of a case of perception-is-reality than anything else. Although all these factors can theoretically increase the potential for concussions in hockey, the heightened awareness and increased reporting could be the main culprit for the rising stats.

Either way, brain injury-related deaths have triggered a debate in media lately, especially after Saskatchewan native and Minnesota Wild enforcer, Derek Boogaard's death in 2011. Although Boogaard fell victim to an accidental drug overdose, research confirmed his complicated concussion recovery was at the heart of the fatality.

Through every period, penalty and puck drop, hockey players risk their lives every shift. But little difference lies in that and the risk involved for fans crossing the street to watch the game. Call it peril, call it life, players step onto the ice for many reasons and despite the controversy, many do it with discern. It's not because they're unaware of the long-term consequences head trauma can have on the brain and it's not because they're careless. Many have had their "bells rung" and continue to drop their gloves and lace up anyways.

Why?

The reasons are longer than the roster of players in the league and as different as the personalities that fill the arena, but the same is true across the boards. When the stakes are high and the lines are fine, it's just sometimes easier to skate it off than to sit it out.

Are players irresponsible or do they just know more about life than the rest of us? A concussion is a temporary alteration in consciousness that occurs immediately after a blow to the head — a troubling feat even for those not drawing hefty paychecks from the sport. Cumulative effects of having more than one concussion can be fatal, but former WHL and CIS hockey player Brett Novak, 29, says lack of passion is also fatal.

Novak says he can remember the first time he laced up his skates as a two-year-old and also the first memory he was carried off the ice with his first concussion — albeit a foggy one. He explains how the pressure from coaches and the desire to play have sometimes outweighed the reasons for him not to. When the forefront of a

concussion diagnosis is self-defined, that intrinsic desire can sometimes smother all else.

“It’s not like a broken bone — you can’t do an x-ray. It’s all self-diagnosed so sometimes I’d play even if I had doubts I was ready to.” Novak says his first concussion at age 20 happened when he played for the Prince Albert Raiders hockey club. The now-teacher with a Bachelor of Science degree in Kinesiology who was awarded “Most Games Played as a Prince Albert Raider” says in that first instance it was obvious something wasn’t right. He says unfortunately though, all concussions aren’t so easy-to-read.

“There were times during the recovery process where I thought I was fine but then random triggers would cause symptoms again.” He says after periods of time feeling healthy, florescent lights, loud noises and movement in his peripherals were all catalysts to frustrating and recurring symptoms.

In both NHL and junior ranks, the reality is that the coach isn’t going to bench a player when he says he’s feeling well enough to play. The same is true for a player when he’s asked how “cloudy” he’s feeling on a scale of 1-10— there’s just no one else’s word to go by. With all that’s implemented in terms of new concussion protocols, it’s easy to see how honesty is as tough to go by as the lose set of measures it’s defined by. New NHL rules require the player to be evaluated by a physician (not just a trainer) if he exhibits a list of possible concussion symptoms. The problem is, these rules don’t have enough muscle to actually get them off the ice in the first place. A determined player could easily attest to feeling ready to play and prematurely step on the ice for his next shift.

Novak says parents of players in the minor leagues shouldn’t take the sport away from their children just because they’ve been concussed and that the benefits of playing far outweigh the risks. “When you sign up for the sport you know coming in there’s a risk you can get hurt, but the life lessons that sports gives kids is invaluable. You obviously have to be smart and listen to the doctors, but having a concussion shouldn’t be the be-all end-all.”

And it doesn’t end with hockey. But where’s the line?

Connor Ward-Merkl, a 15-year-old former midget football player says he chose to end his career because of a concussion but not everyone puts health first.

“I’ve always known there was a risk of being seriously injured, but it’s like you love playing so much that it’s worth it. I would have kept playing but the doctor said there would be major health risks if I kept going — it was definitely a hard decision.” The former North Winnipeg Nomads player explains how players put a lot of time and energy into their sports for a reason, but that fundamentally, it all comes down to health.

Ward-Merkl speaks of his friend whose had nine concussions. “The doctor told him he shouldn’t play anymore or he’d have major consequences when he’s older. He told him he’d have slurred speech and major problems by age 40 if he kept getting hit but he doesn’t care. He stole the doctor’s notepad and forged the signature and gave it to his coach.”

Nobody’s saying that players with blows to the head need to give their head a shake and ignore the dangers, but it is possible there’s a reason some of these hardheaded players are the way they are.

And maybe we can learn a thing or two from them.

Work ethic, commitment, loyalty and grit — it’s possible contact team sports are the only organic ways to learn these values. Hockey players — they’re entertainers, they’re performers and they’re warriors who show up for battle and fight for the rush that only athletes know. They do it for the culture and comradery that only exists between teammates on ice, like soldiers who have together tasted the crucible of combat.

Bravery or stupidity — call it a toss-up, this breed is a force to be reckoned with and fight for far more than the glitz and glory we see in the highlight reels. They live for competition and it courses through their veins. Sure, juggling the risks can take more coordination than the game itself, but they’re big boys and it’s a conundrum only they have the power to dangle around.

Maybe the difference lies in the level of ignorance but then again, maybe it lies in the level of passion they’re wired with.

And they do it for a reason — they do it for passion.

They do it for the love of the game.