

# An Open Letter to NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman: It's Time to Ban Fighting

It's time to act. The National Hockey League must take immediate steps to ban fighting and outlaw *all* blows to the head. And you, Mr. Bettman, as league commissioner, must lead the way.

Fighting in hockey can no longer be a long-debated issue pitting those who find it barbaric and unsportsmanlike and those who argue that it's an integral part of the fabric of the game. The growing mound of research on sports concussions and brain injuries has taken the fighting issue to an entirely different level. We're talking about short-and-long-term damage to the *brain*, the very foundation of who we are as people.

Commissioner Bettman, it's very possible that concussions and degenerative brain disease caused by blows to the head — such as chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) — will be the biggest issue in sports in the coming decade. Continuing to downplay what we know about sports-based brain injuries, while simultaneously supporting fighting as an elemental aspect of the NHL game, is simply irresponsible.

You are right on one point: science has yet to provide us with all the answers when it comes to head trauma and concussions. But we do know that concussions are a big problem and we all intuitively know that a fist swung against a skull at a high rate of speed is not good for the brain inside that skull.

Repeated head trauma has shortened the careers of Pat LaFontaine, Eric Lindros, and Keith Primeau. Currently, concussions are threatening the careers of Pittsburgh Penguins' superstar Sidney Crosby and the Philadelphia Flyers' Chris Pronger. Three enforcers, Derek Boogard, Rick Rypien, and Wade Belak, whose primary job was to protect teammates by throwing fists at the heads of opponents, have died in the past year. It's certainly possible the brain trauma they received on the ice from their fellow combatants played a significant role in their deaths.

Your league has created a department of player safety. That's well and good. But a quick question: How can you continue to allow fighting, in which the primary target is the head of your opponent, and seriously make the argument that you're doing all you can to make player safety a priority?

You don't have to be a pioneer in this area Mr. Bettman. The International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) already bans fighting and all blows to the head. So does the Ontario Hockey League (OHL), the NCAA, and other hockey organizations. The Mayo Clinic Sports Medicine Center Ice Hockey Summit recommended prohibiting fighting and all contact to the head at every level of the game, including the NHL, a little more than a year ago.

While there are certainly many potential rule changes that need to be carefully examined to make sure they result in a safer game, banning fighting isn't one of them. It's clear fighting is not a safe policy.

Mr. Bettman, you're the leader of the most influential hockey organization in the world. As such, you have the responsibility to make hockey as safe as possible for the players in the NHL. You also have the moral responsibility to be a good sports citizen and do what you can to make hockey all the way down to the youth level as safe as possible. There are nearly 1 million youth hockey players in the United States and Canada. Like it or not, the actions you take — or don't take — impact these young hockey players, either positively or negatively.

According to an analysis of hockey-related concussions written by Dr. Syd Johnson of Dalhousie University, and published in the Canadian Medical Association Journal last year, one study found that up to 25% of all players in junior hockey leagues sustain concussions in any given season.

"The way hockey is played by the professionals is imitated in junior hockey," wrote Johnson in the journal article. "This creates a vicious cycle in which young athletes learn to play in a way that inevitably causes injury and in turn influences the next generation of players. It's time to break that cycle and teach youths to play in a way that emphasizes skill and protects their brains, so they'll be prepared to do the same thing when they grow up."

Mr. Bettman, your position as commissioner of the NHL demands that you confront this issue head on and heed the call for policy change when it comes to fighting. There isn't a single thing you can do that will communicate your seriousness about protecting our hockey players' brains - at all levels — than immediately banning fighting and all blows to the head in the NHL.

On behalf of hockey players everywhere - and their families — here's hoping you have the strength and courage to take this decisive step.

Sincerely,

**Ralph Nader, Founder, League of Fans**

**Ken Reed, Sports Policy Director, League of Fans**