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10-10-2005

A new NHL season and some rule changes

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "A new NHL season and some rule changes" (2005). *On Sport and Society*. 684.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/684>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
A new NHL season and some rule changes
OCTOBER 10, 2005

The return of the National Hockey League last week was one of those events easily lost amidst the start of baseball's playoffs, the heating up of the college football season, and the occasional game of interest in the National Football League. For those who did notice, it was a time for celebration and thanksgiving.

The NHL is back in a new and improved form. There have been a number of rule changes designed to improve the offensive game. The Red Line is gone. That pesky little off sides pass, that ruined many a breakaway and many a two-on-one, will no longer impede play. The offensive game should be given a jump-start by this change alone.

Then there are rules and equipment changes affecting the goalie. Equipment shrinkage will offer the shooter eleven percent more open space at the goal-mouth. In addition, the goalie's movements will be restricted to behind the net and the goalie will not be allowed to head towards the corners to play the puck.

Players caught in the zone on a potential off-sides can clear the zone by a simple touch of the blue line rather than actually being required to leave the attacking zone. Again the hope is for more offense.

All these changes should improve the flow of the game with fewer stoppages of play. There is nothing like up and down non-stop hockey for three or four minutes at a time or even longer. The energy expenditures by players and fans both increase, and the result is excitement at a very high level.

More important than rules changes, however, is the decision to actually enforce current rules. Hooking, cross-checking, and holding will, it is promised, be enforced strictly. Clutch and grab hockey has been the bane of the past several years, just as clutch and grab basketball hurt the NBA for many years. If these rules are enforced it will improve the flow of the game exponentially.

Some worry that this will cut down the heavy hitting and thus negatively impact the appeal of the game for those who love the sound of bone-on-bone and bone-on-flesh. This is extremely doubtful, but only time will tell. What it is more likely to cut down on is fighting, which often starts from clutch and grab tactics that frustrate the opposing player, especially when they are victims of inferior defense players.

After the first week of the season any analysis is tentative but, indeed, after watching pieces of many games, and large chunks of some, it appears to me that so far the tealeaves are positive. The number of breakaways from the two-line pass is not substantial, but a few of them in each game add appreciably to the excitement on the ice. These produce high-tension action with the skater coming at the goalie one-on-one, always an exciting moment.

Overall game flow seems to be much improved and this new style will place a premium on skating and passing, the essence of high quality hockey. The flow improvement must also be attributed to the enforcement of the rules, although admittedly players are still having difficulty breaking old habits. The tendency to clutch and grab is still a reflex action for any number of players and so the number of penalties for holding and hooking seem to be up. Cross-checking from behind, which had become as common as ice in a NHL game, is also a reflex action difficult to break and the number of cross-checking penalties is quite high.

Players seem shocked that referees are enforcing the rules, and presumably they will soon adjust their games to the new reality. This could turn into a test of wills between the league and players and one hopes that the league will prevail. One also hopes that these rule changes will not be allowed to slip away during playoff hockey.

One other major change is that there will be no ties in the NHL. Although a tie is not a problem for me, especially if both teams play equally well, there seems to be a feeling that a tie is un-American. Maybe it is. One wonders if it is also un-Canadian. To prevent all ties the NHL has instituted a three-shot penalty shoot-out. This certainly adds to the excitement and drama event and if that's what people want there is probably little harm done.

More interesting to me, however, is the continued use of the four-on-four five-minute overtime period. This produces

magnificent high-speed hockey and remains the best argument one could find for one more major change in the game of hockey. This could come in the form of either a larger ice surface, or the institution of four-on-four hockey as the standard format. I personally would prefer the four-on-four format, as it would add a new strategic element into the game as well as make it a faster game. Coaches would have to make a decision whether to go with three linemen and one defense-man, or two of each. The choices would be dictated by such variables as game situation, team match-ups, and player match-ups. All in all it would add substantially to game strategy and game excitement.

What remains to be seen is how the fans will respond to the changes and how much fallout there will be from the lockout. A number of franchises were in deep trouble before the lockout and their future is still in doubt.

So welcome back to the NHL and may the labor wounds quickly heal, although a 12 percent pay cut isn't likely to aid that process.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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