

# Hockey's governing body ignores growing problem

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## OPINION

**F**OLLOWING a recent week on the ice officiating hockey games — a week where I had to dole out multiple game misconducts for gratuitously violent hits and unsportsmanlike behaviour — I did a soft canvass of some referee friends to ask them all the same question.

Is hockey more abusive than ever before?

I often tell myself that the plural of anecdote is not data. Thus, my terrible, horrible, no-good, very bad week behind a whistle is not necessarily proof of anything. But in casual conversation with other officials, there was a strong feeling that things are worse now.

So you can imagine my reaction this week when Hockey Canada released its annual report on maltreatment, the term used in the rule book to describe unsportsmanlike, abusive or discrimi-

natory language or behaviour.

The report tracked penalties assessed in the 2023-24 season under Rule 11.4, which describes penalties for discriminatory behaviour by players or team officials.

How did hockey fare? There were 1,291 penalties assessed under Rule 11.4 for “verbal taunts, insults or intimidation” based on discriminatory grounds such as race, ethnic origin, skin colour, language spoken, religion, age, sex/sexual orientation/gender identity, marital or familial status, genetic characteristics or disability.

That total is 40 per cent higher than the previous season, and 150 per cent higher than it was in 2021-22, the first full season the Section 11 rule was in force.

The company line from Hockey Canada was that the numbers, in and of themselves, were no cause for concern. That the increase in reported incidents has more to do with increased efforts to collect data and an increased awareness officials have of the rule.

That might be a reasonable explanation, for a couple of reasons.

Hockey Canada is way better at collecting data on penalties. In fact, this year, all game reports for serious penalties are being filed through a central,

online portal so that trends in infractions can be assessed in real time.

It's also true that Section 11 is still relatively new. Although that section is really just a compendium of pre-existing penalties brought together under one heading, the increased emphasis on penalizing maltreatment was just introduced in the fall of 2021.

However, neither of those two factors should be used to mitigate concern about what the numbers are telling us. Particularly when it appears Hockey Canada is deliberately withholding other, troubling data.

For example, Hockey Canada refused to provide the actual numbers for other Section 11 rules for unsportsmanlike conduct, abusive behaviour that does not rise to the level of Rule 11.4, spitting and the physical harassment of officials. There is a bar graph in the report, and even though the results are a bit vague, it's clear that the occurrence rates of other forms of abusive behaviour are high and getting higher.

Consider that when Hockey Canada reported 1,291 incidents under Rule 11.4 (discrimination), it worked out to a rate of 2.57 per 1,000 hockey players. The occurrence rate of game misconducts handed out for unsportsmanlike conduct were well over 4.0 per 1,000

players, and roughly 25-30 per cent higher than the year before.

This is where the Hockey Canada's “nothing to see here” narrative brings other problems into focus.

For example, the maltreatment report stated there is a commitment to “develop, distribute and educate participants, parents, administrators and volunteers” about the need to eliminate abusive behaviour. But when you look for examples of how Hockey Canada is living that pledge, there's nothing.

Outside the report, there are some efforts at work. The Respect in Sport program is still a required element for the certification of officials and coaches. But beyond that, the hockey establishment relies largely on policy, with little effort put into action.

Case in point: when Hockey Canada introduces new rules, or puts emphasis on an existing rule to improve enforcement, that information is provided to officials at their annual certification clinics. Memos on rule changes or enhancements are provided to area hockey associations, but there is no concerted effort to educate coaches and players on the rules of the game.

The result is that referees not only have to enforce new rules, they are also asked to educate players and coaches

on the rule book and any changes. Confrontations between referees (who know the rules) and angry players and coaches (who do not) is fertile ground for maltreatment penalties.

Hockey Canada is fighting desperately to rehabilitate the reputation of the sport in the wake of the scandal involving sexual assault allegations against former world junior hockey players. The maltreatment report is a good step forward in creating greater transparency and accountability, the precursors to improving hockey culture.

However, it seems the hockey establishment is going out of its way to ignore what the data is telling us: that despite their better efforts, there is a chance the culture is getting worse.

Hockey Canada got into trouble during the sexual assault scandal for putting the reputation of the game before the welfare of people who were victimized by some of the more toxic aspects of hockey's culture.

After an experience like that, you would think that hockey's stewards would know burying unflattering data in a report claiming to be transparent is not going to heal the sport's black eye.

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