



Fighting in Hockey: Officials' Opinions

Pre-Amble

Fighting's existence in hockey continues to be a topic discussed and reflected upon. Does it have a place our game? Does fighting make the game stronger or weaker? [One survey](#) found that "61% of Canadians...support banning fighting in professional hockey, while 30% are opposed and 9% are not sure." However, the percentage of those in favor of a ban decreased when considering whether a respondent identified as a "true fan,"¹ at which support for a ban on fighting in professional hockey reaches only 50% rather than 61%.

Those previous stats focused on professional hockey, however a transition may also be occurring in junior hockey. In summer 2023, the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League [became the first major junior league to ban fighting](#) with stronger penalties, stronger suspensions, a clear mandate in opposition to fighting and effort to change the game's culture.

Given this discussion about fighting, wpgrefs.com sought the opinion of its online community using a survey about fighting.

Methods: The Survey

The survey was posted on wpgrefs.com between September 2023 and December 2023. It was advertised using social media and email blasts to the wpgrefs.com email list during this same period. The demographic items on the survey included location experience, gender and age questions.

Survey participants were asked to respond to items related to the definition of a fight, their opinion of fighting rules, their belief of the place of fighting in the game, whether they enjoy breaking up fights, and a space to share other comments.

Results

There were 60 respondents:

- Experience: 2 respondents with 0-1 years of experience, 17 with 1-3 years of experience, 11 with 4-6 years, 27 with 7+ years and 3 who chose to no disclose.
- Age: 5 respondents 12-14 years old, 5 of 15-17 years, 11 of 18-20 years, 2 of 21-23, and 35 of 24+ years old. 2 preferred not to disclose.
- Gender: 6 respondents identified as female, 52 as male, 0 as other and 2 preferred not to disclose.
- Place of residence: 45 respondents lived in Winnipeg, 11 lived outside Winnipeg but in Manitoba, and 4 lived outside Manitoba but in Canada.

¹ A "true fan" is defined as, "hockey fans, who truly enjoy watching the game."

- Role: 57 respondents identified as on-ice officials, 8 identified as off-ice officials, 23 as officiating mentors, 8 as officiating administrators, and 1 as “other-parent”.

The remainder of the survey’s results will be divided into the following parts:

- 1) Definition of a Fight,
- 2) Strength of hockey rules related to fights,
- 3) Belief that fighting should be part of the game,
- 4) Enjoyment of breaking up fights,
- 5) Other comments.

Definition of a fight

Respondents were asked what characteristics define a fight by answering a yes or no question.

Table 1: “Actions required by players for a situation to qualify as a fight.” Percentage of “Yes” responses (Respondents of all ages, n = 60)

<i>Squaring off with your opponent.</i>	25.69%
<i>Pushing or shoving.</i>	0.92%
<i>Throwing at least 1 punch.</i>	10.09%
<i>Throwing 2 or more punches.</i>	35.78%
<i>Both players throwing at least one punch.</i>	22.94%
<i>Other*</i>	4.59%

**Other responses = “strong language use,” “fight has to be consented between combatants,” “helmets and gloves off” and “There is no one size fits all definition. You just know it when you see it!”*

Strength of hockey rules related to fights

There were three survey questions that highlighted respondents’ opinions about the rules related to fighting in hockey (percentage in brackets represents the percentage of time that option was selected by respondents of any age, number of respondents = 60).

- Select one of the following to fill in the blank: “Hockey’s rules regarding fighting _____.”
 - a. need to be stronger (26.67%)
 - b. are just right (60%)
 - c. need to be less strong (13.33%)
- There were also two agree or disagree items:

Table 2: Agree or disagree with statements about fighting in minor and junior hockey. (Respondents of all ages, n = 60)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
<i>Fighting should be "allowed" in minor hockey, in whatever way it is currently "allowed".</i>	31.67%	21.67%	25.00%	10.00%	11.67%
<i>Fighting should be "allowed" in junior levels and up in whatever way it is currently "allowed".</i>	16.67%	11.67%	20.00%	20.00%	31.67%

Belief that fighting should be stay in the game

There were four yes-no-maybe items (Tables 3, 4 and 5) and three agree-disagree items (Table 6) related to the belief that fighting should stay in the game.

Table 3: As a..., I believe we should keep finding in the game. (Respondents of all ages, n = 60)

	Yes	Maybe	No
<i>As a coach, I believe we should keep fighting in the game.</i>	51.67%	20.00%	28.33%
<i>As a referee, I believe we should keep fighting in the game.</i>	50.00%	15.00%	35.00%
<i>As a player, I believe we should keep fighting in the game.</i>	56.67%	18.33%	25.00%
<i>As a fan, I believe we should keep fighting in the game.</i>	56.67%	11.67%	31.67%

Table 3 represents data for all 60 respondents. Data was also analyzed by dividing it into those older than 18 (n = 48 respondents) and under 18 (n = 12 respondents). That segregated data is shown in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4: As a..., I believe we should keep finding in the game. (Respondent ages 12-17, n = 12)

	Yes	Maybe	No
<i>As a coach, I believe we should keep fighting in the game.</i>	41.67%	8.33%	50.00%
<i>As a referee, I believe we should keep fighting in the game.</i>	33.33%	16.67%	50.00%
<i>As a player, I believe we should keep fighting in the game.</i>	41.67%	25.00%	33.33%
<i>As a fan, I believe we should keep fighting in the game.</i>	25.00%	25.00%	50.00%

Table 5: As a..., I believe we should keep finding in the game. (Respondent ages 18+, n = 48)

	Yes	Maybe	No
<i>As a coach, I believe we should keep fighting in the game.</i>	54.17%	22.92%	22.92%
<i>As a referee, I believe we should keep fighting in the game.</i>	54.17%	14.58%	31.25%
<i>As a player, I believe we should keep fighting in the game.</i>	60.42%	16.67%	22.92%
<i>As a fan, I believe we should keep fighting in the game.</i>	64.58%	8.33%	27.08%

Table 6: Agree or disagree with statements about fighting being a part of Hockey. (Respondents of all ages, n = 60)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
<i>Fighting is an important part of the game.</i>	16.67%	15.00%	18.33%	30.00%	20.00%
<i>Banning fighting will lead to unexpected negative consequences.</i>	15.00%	8.33%	18.33%	26.67%	31.67%
<i>The removal of fighting is a good idea.</i>	30.00%	25.00%	18.33%	10.00%	16.67%
<i>Fighting takes away from the skill of the game.</i>	15.00%	33.33%	21.67%	20.00%	10.00%

Enjoyment of breaking up fights

There was one agree or disagree item that did not fit into the themes of definition, rules, or belief. Instead, it fit into its own category of “enjoyment of breaking up fights.” The following table provides the data both for the entire group and divided into three age categories.

Table 7: Agree or disagree with “I enjoy breaking up fights or the opportunity to break up fights.”

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
<i>All Ages (n = 60)</i>	13.33%	16.67%	33.33%	23.33%	13.33%
<i>12-17 Years Old (n = 12)</i>	25.00%	25.00%	16.67%	25.00%	8.33%
<i>18-23 Years Old (n = 13)</i>	0.00%	0.00%	30.77%	53.85%	15.38%
<i>24+ Years Old (n = 35)</i>	14.29%	20.00%	40.00%	11.43%	14.29%

Miscellaneous: “Other” comments

Respondents were also given the opportunity to leave other comments about fighting. 20 out of 60 respondents (33.33%) chose to leave an extra comment about fighting in hockey (see appendix for the full list).

- 14 out of those 20 (70% of all comments) were related to “belief that fighting is part of the game”.
- 9 of those 14 (64.29%) argued to keep fighting in the game.

Discussion

Definition of a fight

Respondents prioritized the definition of a fight by the commitment of both players to fight. This can be described as “it takes two to tango”.² This was demonstrated in 3 ways:

- The least selected items were “pushing and shoving” (0.92%) and “throwing at least 1 punch” (10.09%)—both refer to lower levels of mutual engagement.
- In comparison, “squaring off” (25.69%), “throwing 2 or more punches” (35.78%) and “both players throwing at least one punch” (22.94%) were selected more often and are related to a higher level of mutual engagement between players.
- 3 of the 4 “other” responses also refer to engagement: “strong language use,” “fight has to be consented between combatants” and “helmets and gloves off.”

Strength of hockey rules for fighting

Overall, a strong plurality of respondents (60%) said that hockey rules for fighting were “just right”. However, when asked about whether fighting at different levels of hockey the following was found:

- minor hockey in whatever way it currently is, more than half of respondents (53.33%) disagreed.
- junior hockey or up in whatever way it currently is, more than half of the respondents (51.67%) agreed.

This suggests that the idea of fighting in older levels of hockey (including perhaps professional) is still appealing to more referees than not, however, there is less support for fighting in the minor levels.

Belief that fighting should stay in the game

Overall, regardless of whether the respondent was answering as a referee, coach, player or fan, 50 to 56.67% of respondents said they believe fighting should be part of the game (Table 3). This result seems to exist in a middle ground of results found in the [previously mentioned survey](#) where 61% of Canadians support a ban of fighting in professional hockey but only 50% of “true fans” support a ban.

The current survey also separated the results of the belief that fighting should be part of the game into those under, and those over, 18 years old. This analysis yielded an interesting result, in that:

- those under 18 (Table 4) were more likely to say “maybe” or “no” regardless of whether they were answering as a coach, referee, player, or fan.

² Interestingly, how officials define a fight is different from the Hockey Canada rule book which defines a fight as, “A fight will be deemed to have occurred when at least one player punches or attempts to punch an opponent...” (Hockey Canada Rule 7.10). Therefore, referees who completed this survey used their knowledge of the game rather than knowledge of the rules to define a fight. This could be due to preference or lack of rule knowledge.

- those over 18 (Table 5) were more likely to say “yes” regardless of whether they were answering as a coach, referee, player, or fan.

These age results could suggest a shift in thinking, where the future hockey participants have lower desire to see fighting in hockey or it could mean that as people age, they are more likely to support fighting in hockey. Admittedly, either conclusion is impossible to confirm due to the short time span of this survey as well as the small sample size.

Finally, the agree or disagree items partially reflected the majority of respondent’s desire to keep fighting in the game.

- First, two items were worded to agree with the belief that fighting is part of the game. Those were: *Fighting is an important part of the game* and *Banning fighting will lead to unexpected negative consequences*.
 - 50 to 58.34% of respondents agreed with both these statements. This replicates the finding in Table 3, where 50 to 56.67% of respondents said fighting should stay in hockey—we would expect those who think fighting should remain part of hockey to agree with these statements.
- Second, two items were worded to contradict the belief that fighting should remain a part of the game. These items were: *The removal of fighting is a good idea* and *Fighting takes away from the skill of the game*.
 - 48.33 to 55% of respondents disagreed with these statements. This also reflects the 50 to 56.67% finding—we would expect those who think fighting should be part of the game to disagree with these statements.

Overall, the response pattern in this section suggests the survey respondents were diligently answering questions which increases to strength of these results. So, the 50 to 56.67% agreeing with fighting staying in the game and the age differences appear to be reliable outcomes.

Enjoyment of breaking up fights

The agree or disagree item that focused on whether respondents enjoyed breaking up fights provided a counter-intuitive result. Remember, 50 to 56.67% of respondents believed that fighting should stay in the game. One might theorize that a similar proportion may enjoy breaking up fights.

However, this survey showed a relatively balanced three way split between disagreeing (30.00%), being neutral (33.33%) or agreeing (36.67%)³ with the statement, “I enjoy breaking up fights or the opportunity to break up fights.” This is not the same pattern as the 50 to 56.67% who believe fighting should stay in the game.

³ When added together: strongly disagree + disagree = 30.00%, neutral = 33.33% and strongly agree + agree = 36.67%.

So, it appears that there is a greater desire to see fighting remain in the game, but a lesser desire to be the one to break-up a fight. This lesser desire to be the one to break-up fights than watch fights could be a result of age and experience factors. Here are three possibilities:

- Younger refs do not want to break up fights since they have never broken up a fight and have not fully physically matured yet.⁴
- Young adult officials are willing to break up fights due to an air of invincibility and coming into their physical prime.
- Meanwhile, the oldest refs may not be interested in breaking up fights because they are “not as young as they used to be.”⁵

If this was the case, then we should see three things and we can check the existence of each with Table 7:

<i>Theory for the expected agree or disagree response to, “I enjoy breaking up fights or the opportunity to break up fights.”</i>	Does Table 7 confirm this theory?
<i>Younger referees’ responses⁶ should shift towards the “Strongly Disagree.”</i>	Yes. 50.00% of responses were “Strongly Disagree” or “Disagree”.
<i>Young adult referees’ responses⁷ should shift towards the “Strongly Agree.”</i>	Yes. 69.23% of responses were “Agree” or “Strongly Agree”.
<i>Older referees’ responses⁸ should have a more equal set of response ranging between “Strongly Disagree” and “Strongly Agree.”</i>	Kind of. Each response has at least 11% with a slight preference toward the “Strongly Disagree” end of the response range.

Overall, there is evidence that there is a difference between a believe that fighting should stay in the game and enjoyment of breaking up fights. This difference could be explained by either the aging process from being a teenage to being a middle-aged+ adult or generational differences.

⁴ Younger refs were also less likely than older refs to agree that fighting should stay in the game.

⁵ One limitation to this survey is that the 24+ group includes too many age groups. So, conclusions about a potential difference between watching a fight as a spectator and breaking one up as an official are limited.

⁶ Ages 12-17.

⁷ Ages 18-23.

⁸ Ages 24+, which includes young adults, middle adults, and older adults.

Miscellaneous: “Other” comments

Interestingly, 9/14 (64.29%) “belief of fighting in hockey” comments argued that fighting should stay in the game. This represents a slightly larger proportion of pro-fighting arguments than the 50 to 56.67% (Table 3) of respondents who felt fighting should stay in the game.

This result of the “other” comments suggests that those who wanted fighting to stay in hockey felt greater need to leave a comment than those who did not want fighting to stay in hockey.

Summary and Conclusion

Overall, this survey demonstrated that it does not matter if a referee is using the perspective of a coach, referee, player, or fan—the results are overall consistent that 50 to 56.67% believe fighting has a place in the game. This 50 to 56.67% of referees saying that fighting should remain in the game is also similar to 50% of “true fans” who said the same thing about professional hockey in a different [survey](#). Indeed, referees do not appear to have different opinions than that of the hockey community as a whole.

Research Limitations

The primary limitations to this research included the following:

- Our sample was heavily influence by adults with only 12 (20% of sample) respondents being minors.
- The large majority of respondents were in Manitoba (only 4 out of 60 were from outside Manitoba).
- We were also limited in understanding aging effects due to the surveys’ 3-month time span.

Appendix: Unedited Miscellaneous Comments

- I understand why traditionally fights start. A big hit (regardless if clean or dirty), late jabs at the goalie, scrums in front of the net.
Late jabs at the goalie should be dealt with immediately and maybe with a harsher consequence. Eliminate the trigger points with bigger consequences. A big clean hit is fine. The player that starts the fight after the hit, again bigger consequences. "Bad hit, also bigger consequence so the players don't have to "solve it" themselves. There has to be consistency from the officials so that players know it's serious.
- In some perspectives such as parents, they would not want to see their kids getting injured on ice, even if their kid is prepared to fight.
- I don't believe it should be taken out of the game, QMJHL has basically taken out that role for the those players looking to play someday. Fighting should never be taken out of major junior or pro but should never be allowed to take place in minor hockey
- fighting is a criminal act. it seems to be excused by society if its on ice
- I left many questions neutral or maybe because I'm not an official. I'm a parent of a U18 player. I hope that you or other Manitoba or Wpg hockey organizations will survey parents, players, and coaches. I was pleasantly surprised by the Quebec decision.
- It's a throwback to a bygone era of the game. Its barbaric. I don't miss it when it doesn't happen and generally I am disappointed when it does. Shows the players have no ability to manage their emotions productively. An embarrassment.
- The stick infractions will be less if there are different consequences. A player fight stops this more dangerous action.
- While seemingly barbaric, the prospect of having to fight has for generations helped prevent excessively dirty play.
- Obviously this came from a board room who have no idea what goes on in a rink. This is to please the government only. Why not let people who have played run hockey Canada?
- It works for the Olympics. As long as there is a commitment to better refereeing, more calls are made, and less need for fighting.
- Intentional actions require more strict consequences in order to minimize the potential for injury. If leagues imposed suspensions and bans for preventable actions the players wouldn't feel the need to stick up for each other by using fighting as their venue. (Example- hitting from behind- automatic 10 games- first offence - second offence - season ban etc.) although at times these actions aren't intended to play out as they do the potential that they may, might make a player think twice about making a hit. This also applies to high hits and slashing).
- Developmentally is harder for players to control their impulse to fight when they are younger. I have higher expectations for older players. I understand the urge to fight after being speared, spit on, hair pulled or hit dirty
- Hitting should start at a younger age, visors should be worn in all junior hockey, and fighting should be normalized. If we care about player safety, known risks should be tolerated to build skills, not avoided resulting in worse outcomes.
- When players are wearing a mask, throwing punches is completely irrelevant as there is no purpose of a fight at a young age. Plus being an official breaking up a fight is never fun, and with us basically have no equipment on, usually an official gets hurt.
- I grew up with fighting in hockey so I guess that I'm biased but I still think it belongs in hockey
- Most fights in minor hockey are tickle fights. They don't know how to fight so it will phase out naturally. Fighting is way down from the old Juvenile days.
- While fighting is exciting and interesting, at the end of the day the right thing to do is to increase rules around it due to safety issues and concussions. It sucks, but it's the reality.
There are fewer and fewer fights even in elite hockey now. So we are moving in that direction.
- As more and more rules have come out to eliminate fighting in hockey, I've seen more cheap shots than before. Idiot players need to be held accountable for stuff they do on the ice and the referees can only do so much. I'm old school so know from past experience that guys would think twice about a cheap shot if they knew there were consequences and a penalty is not a consequence. I think the powers that be should let the players police themselves and it would clean up all the garbage.
- A lack of respect has taken place in junior hockey, visible with the number of non-fighting suspendable incidents, possibly driven by the lack of fear of being pulled into a fight and possibly driven by an increase in emotions that is not released due to a fight.
- If you take out fighting there will be more stick infractions and hits from behind