The deaths of three hockey “enforcers:” The tragic contradictions of professional sports

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On August 31 North American ice hockey fans were shocked to hear of the death, presumed to be a suicide, of Wade Belak, formerly of the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Nashville Predators. Belak’s death followed the August 15 suicide of Rick Rypien of the Vancouver Canucks and the May 13 alcohol and drugs-related death of Derek “Boogeyman” Boogaard of the New York Rangers.

The three men (all born in western Canada) were known as “enforcers,” tough guys whose job was to intimidate opposing players physically, provoking fistfights on a regular basis. The trio of tragic deaths highlighted the concerns of many hockey fans (especially in Canada where hockey dominates amateur and professional sports) about the direction in which the game is moving.

Hockey is played at a fast and fluid pace, with players skating around a confined space at speeds of 30 mph (45 km/h). Robust physical contact is a feature of the game; injuries are inevitable. Players at the highest level have to be strong and they have to be tough.

But hockey also requires graceful, almost delicate, skating and stick handling. The truly magical moments in the game arise out of rapid and elegant passing moves. Occasionally a player like Gordie Howe can combine awe-inspiring skills with a fearsome reputation as a tough guy. In general however there is a contradiction at the heart of hockey between spatial and bodily-kinesthetic intelligence on the one hand, and raw physical force on the other.

The professional game, played as a spectator sport in front of paying customers, gives rise to yet another contradiction. Professional hockey can be regarded as a showcase of outstanding talent, exhibited for the appreciation of informed and knowledgeable fans. Hockey players are accorded huge respect, especially in Canada, where stars like Wayne Gretzky are national icons. But given the demands of the market, professional hockey is also an entertainment competing for the largest possible audience with a dozen other mass spectacles. The interplay between these contradictions has driven continual and accelerating change in the way hockey has been played over the past century.

Wade Belak’s death resulted in yet another bout of largely empty media polemics over fist fighting in professional hockey. Outbreaks of fist fighting have been a feature of the sport in North America ever since its inception. Opponents of calls to eliminate fighting insist that it just cannot be done: “Fighting in hockey has always been a part of the game and will continue to always be so” (Sean McKnight on www.QNHL.com); “Like it or not, it is a part of the game” (sports writer Ross Bernstein). Even fans who dislike the recurrent fights tend to take the attitude that there is no avoiding it; it is inherent in the game.

But while there is an appearance of continuity, the fistfights of today have different underlying causes and consequences than those of hockey’s infancy.

Michael Robidoux’s “Imagining a Canadian Identity through Sport” appeared in *The Journal of American Folklore* in 2002. Dr. Robidoux describes how young French-Canadian settlers became fascinated by the First Nations’ pastime we now know as lacrosse. As played by the indigenous peoples, lacrosse was a rough, violent game, but with informal rules that prescribed fairness and honourable conduct.

Lacrosse caught the attention of sections of the ruling class that wanted to distance themselves from their British mother country. They saw adopting lacrosse as an alternative to importing games from England. Rather than mould young Canadians into second-hand copies of gentlemanly English cricketers, they would build a generation of rough, tough and proud colonials.

Unfortunately for the Anglo upper-middle-class Protestant nation builders, the toughest and proudest proved to be the Montreal Shamrocks, a team of Irish working-class Roman Catholics, who dominated the sport in the 1870s. The lacrosse establishment reacted by using the same strategy as the Olympic movement a few decades later. Lacrosse declared itself to be an exclusively amateur sport. No one who accepted payment of any kind, including compensation for wages missed during training, would be allowed to play.

Lacrosse became a game for gentlemen of leisure. As a result, most Canadians these days cannot tell a lacrosse stick from a fishing-net. Lacrosse suffered the ultimate indignity after an exhibition tour of England by Canadian players in 1876. Queen Victoria saw a game and declared that it was “very pretty to watch.” Lacrosse was immediately welcomed into private schools for young English ladies, where it is played enthusiastically to this day. (It remains a fairly significant sport at certain US colleges, with relatively prestigious and even Ivy League schools dominating.)

The lessons of the lacrosse debacle were well learned as the promoters of national identity hunted around for a popular alternative. They turned their attention to the strange amalgam of First Nations’ and European sports that we now refer to as ice hockey, despite considerable disquiet over its reputation for violence. That reputation was established right from the first recorded game in 1875. “The Daily British Whig” thundered in indignation: “Shins and heads were battered, benches smashed and the lady spectators fled in confusion.”

Unlike lacrosse, however, there were no attempts to pry hockey loose from its popular roots. The roughness of the game differentiated Canada sharply, not only from the country’s European origins, but from the baseball-besotted United States as well. American journalists were just as indignant over Canadian rowdiness as their British counterparts.

From the 1920s onwards hockey attempted to tone down violent behavior, especially after the spread of hockey to the US, beginning with the acceptance of the Boston Bruins into the National Hockey League (NHL) in 1924. (Only 7 out of the 30 teams in the current NHL are located in Canada; however Canada still accounts for over half the players.) In particular, rules were brought in to regulate what was then referred to as “fisticuffs.” Many of those rules still apply today. North American hockey players who get involved in a fistfight are merely given a five-minute penalty rather than being sent off and banned for several

games, as is the norm in other sports.

Professional hockey underwent radical changes in the 1960s and 1970s. The NHL grew from the "Original Six" teams to its present size, drawn by the prospect of a lucrative US network television contract and pushed by competition from alternative leagues. Hockey teams sprang up in US regions that had no tradition of hockey, virtually all the players originally coming from Canada. The playing season became longer and a gap opened up between a handful of "stars" and a much larger pool of capable but not outstanding players.

Over the extended season there were now more games to be played. Each individual game had to be played with fewer exceptional players on each side. Even as it advanced semi-triumphantly across North America, the spectacle offered by the NHL became less thrilling. Hockey was in danger of becoming dull.

At present, Wikipedia tells us, the NHL dominates professional sports in Canada, but takes fourth place in North America as a whole in fan base, television revenue and sponsorship, behind baseball, US football and basketball. On the other hand, the fan base for hockey is more affluent than for other sports, and its main demographic consists of males aged 18-34, making it an attractive proposition for advertisers.

The financial situation of individual teams in the NHL varies considerably, although revenue sharing agreements even out some of the imbalances and keep marginally viable teams in the league. In some cities, ownership of a hockey team is little more than a self-indulgence for a super-rich local businessman. In cities like Toronto, however, a hockey team can be a sound investment.

The Toronto Maple Leafs are owned by Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment, worth $1.75 billion, which also owns the Toronto Raptors basketball team and the Toronto FC soccer club. Toronto businessman Larry Tanenbaum is the second largest shareholder. The majority shareholder is currently the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan, although the teachers are rumored to be looking to sell some or all of their holding.

Toronto Maple Leafs games are regularly sold out, thanks to season purchases of seats by corporations. Bay Street's finance industry whiz-kids relish the personal and professional prestige that comes from associating themselves with hockey, even if they have no great enthusiasm for the game itself. The bulk purchases by businesses push ticket prices up to the point where a fan like Mark will only go on the rare occasions that his wife gets tickets through her job: "They're sold out virtually every night but the seats are empty. And even if the bankers and lawyers are there, they're in the bar making deals."

WSWS asked Mark to explain the role of a hockey "enforcer."

"The best way to describe it is in terms of the Edmonton Oilers with Wayne Gretzky [in the 1980s]. There was a small guy who was terrifically talented. In that case there was another guy on the team, maybe two, who were bigger and ready to drop the gloves to defend their star. It might be a major check into the boards to get the message across; it might be a fight. It's a kind of unwritten code."

According to Joe Pelletier's "Greatest Hockey Legends" web blog, John Ferguson of the Montréal Canadiens "is often considered to be hockey's first 'goon' or 'designated sitter'… His first game was in 1963 in the Boston Garden and his job was obvious—to thwart the Bruins bigger players from taking liberties against the [Montréal] superstars [Jean Beliveau and others]." (Ferguson got into his first fight twelve seconds into his playing career, but he was also a smart player capable of scoring goals.)

If an enforcer is successful in discouraging mistreatment of his star, he has temporarily worked his way out of a job. The pressure builds to find other uses for an underutilized full-time salary. Mark gives us an example: "There are times when your team is down by a goal or two and the team lags as a result. The shoulders fall and everyone's tired. How do you get back into the game? Often it'll be the enforcer who goes and beats the crap out of somebody to get everybody's adrenaline going again and get them back in the game."

Is there something about ice hockey that makes fighting inevitable? Mark plays once or twice a week in an amateur hockey league in Toronto. How often is there a fight? "For us? Once a season maybe. Everybody knows that if you do that, we're going to punt you out."

So why do fights break out in half of regular season NHL games? "It's an entertainment. During the season, how do you keep the fans interested? Especially if you're a middle of the pack team."

Conscious decisions were undoubtedly made that the fans, especially in the crucial demographic, could be kept interested by exploiting the "entertainment" potential of the enforcers. The strong possibility of seeing two heavyweights pummel each other was perceived as giving hockey an edge over other sports in persuading people to come to the arena or watch the game on television.

Mark explains how a kind of ritualized violence is now a standard part of the proceedings: "There's actually sort of a routine you can watch in a game… you see them circling around, yapping at each other… they call that 'The Dance.' If the crowd gets into it, then they drop the gloves and you know the fists are going to happen."

There are now web sites devoted entirely to showing and "analyzing" the "best" fights from hockey games. Enforcers are supposed to have fan followings that match those of star players. Does that mean enforcers take pride in what they do?

Mark doesn't think so. "You're the best kid in your neighbourhood, then, for example, you go to the GTHL [Greater Toronto Hockey League] and you're one of the two or three top skaters; then you get to the next level up and the competition is very, very intense. So you get someone like a Wade Belak—really, really good, gets to the NHL and he's just a fourth-line enforcer kind of guy, but all his life, that's what his life is…hockey, hockey, hockey.

"Compared to me, they're really, really good hockey players. Compared to the rest of the NHL—they're there for one reason. They're not expected to be scoring goals or be great defencemen. They're expected to be out on the ice when needed to fight. So these guys are getting two to three minutes a game of ice time, whereas the stars at the extreme end are getting twenty minutes."

On September 2, the *Globe and Mail* published an interview with Georges Laraque. Laraque spent 12 years playing as an enforcer in various NHL teams. Laraque is now, among other things, deputy leader of the Green Party of Canada. In the interview, Laraque describes a little of how it feels to be a tough guy.

"The hardest part about fighting is not the physical part, because once you're into a fight, with adrenalin kicking in, you don't feel much pain at all. The struggle is the mental part.

"A fight starts much earlier than when it actually happens. During the season, it is continuously in your mind. You think about the next game, who you might have to fight, whether that team has a superheavyweight. It's in your mind so much that sometimes you cannot even sleep, enjoy your kids' company or even focus at a movie theatre.

"On top of that, you got the pressure of doing well, you want to keep your teammates' respect, and, of course, you want to keep your job. You know one bad loss in a fight can cost you your job. Tough guys are easy to replace."

(Laraque's proudest moment came in February 2000 when he soared above his reputation as a "goon" and scored three goals for the Edmonton Oilers against the Los Angeles Kings.)

Dr. Robidoux attributes hockey's original reputation for violence to populist and working class self-assertion that coincided with the agenda of a section of Canada's ruling class. Ungentlemanly loss of temper leading to "fisticuffs" proclaimed the freedom of the game from standards imposed by the British aristocracy or American big business.

However, the evolution of hockey in the era of mass entertainment has transformed the spontaneous hockey fight into its premeditated and manufactured opposite. The bizarre ritual of the Dance of the Enforcers cannot be seen in any way, shape or form as a proclamation of working class independence. Instead it is an expression of the subjugation of the enforcer to corporate power.

Traditionalists argue that fighting is needed to make hockey a "self-regulating" game. If a player commits an egregious foul, he will be beaten up by someone from the opposing team. This argument is undermined when the playoffs are compared to the regular season. Fights are virtually unknown during the former, but injuries due to "dirty" play do not leap dramatically as a result.

The hollowness of the "self-regulating game" argument is further exposed when European hockey is taken into consideration. Fistfights are not tolerated in professional European hockey leagues, with the same fines and disqualifications in place as for other sports. Yet European hockey has far less physically violent play than the North American game, as well as being considered by many observers to be faster, more skillful and more exciting.

The mere mention of European hockey is sufficient to set die-hard North American traditionalists frothing at the mouth. Typical in this respect is Don Cherry, the veteran commentator of the Canadian Broadcasting Company's long-running "Hockey Night in Canada" television program. Cherry has enriched himself personally by producing an annual DVD showcasing the most brutal fights of the previous year. Every Saturday night during the season, Cherry revels in the more violent aspects of the game while commenting scornfully on the "left wing pinkos" who think that brutality is bad for hockey.

The fact remains that the NHL would be very much weaker in terms of skill without the many Swedish, Finnish, Czech and Russian players on its roster. The extreme chauvinism exhibited by sections of the hockey media reflects the decline of Canada's early dominance of the game, and the inability to accept that, on the global stage, Canadian and American teams are often outplayed and outskated.

A reactionary ideological agenda is also at work here. Cherry concludes many of his broadcasts by singing the praises of the Canadian Armed Forces and police services. Mark Chipman, wealthy owner of the new Winnipeg Jets, has proudly unveiled a logo that mimics the Royal Canadian Air Force.

Underneath the façade of resoundingly patriotic speeches, the ruling elite has nothing but utter contempt for the mass of human beings. Through their control of the media and the sport itself they serve up the kind of entertainment they decide the people want.

Working people need to seize control of sports and culture at every level out of the hands of the wealthy and parasitic elite. Sports must promote true courage and daring in participants and spectators alike, nurture a variety of athletic skills and develop healthy competitive striving based on fair play and sportsmanship. These are human qualities that the socialist society of the future will require in abundance.

A capacity for ritualized thuggery will be consigned to the dustbin of history, along with the class whose selfish interests such performances perpetuate.