

The Girls of Winter

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Todd Bertuzzi's sucker-punch in the NHL, in 2004, certainly sparked outrage from Canadians who watch a game for the fighting but are still sickened by the bloody outcome. Yet, in a small Ontario town, and in many local arenas, a more civilized game is emerging. The girls have arrived - and the boys are pulling back.

The boys of the Ontario Minor Hockey Association Pee wee division in Grimsby, Ontario no longer consider hockey to be an all-male sport. More girls than ever before have entered the arena. Their skates are tied with perfect bows. Their hair is pulled back into ponytails and, as one father joked, while watching a pre-game warm up, "I had to return a pair of hockey pants today because my daughter thought they made her thighs look too big."

Are these girls, who only want to play hockey, silently, subtly and without knowing it, effecting a change in the way our boys think of a sport well known for its violence?

There were nine young women in Pee wee house league in 2004, the year North America witnessed, and were infuriated, by the devastating result of rough justice in hockey. These young women changed from girl to hockey player in a prison-cell- sized room of an old, decrepit arena. The crooked sign on the door simply stated, "Ladies Change Room." Inside, an old mirror with flowers etched into the corners hung from a coat hook. Black hockey tape encircled the edges. More evidence you can't take the hockey out of the player, guy or girl.

Yet, even as the girls had taken the division by storm, one as her team's Captain and a top goal scorer, a young boy remarked, "I feel protective of the girls and don't want to see them get hit."

Boys have been told all their lives by parents, and society, that it is wrong to hit a girl. They are now taking this ingrained lesson out onto the ice and into one of our most violent sports. Meanwhile, our young female captain protested to her mother, "Don't call me Princess," and would have been insulted if she thought her opponents were not checking her and skating gingerly around her.

"My daughter wants to be thought of as a hockey player, not as a girl playing hockey," her mother said. Her daughter had determination, skill, and a killer wrist shot. None of her male team mates questioned her right to be in the lineup.

Yet the boys were thinking first and acting second before taking down any other player, if only for an instant. "The thought is always there that the player coming toward me may be a girl," explained one young forward.

This new thinking had already hit the bantam level above pee wee. Said one bantam forward, "I didn't check one player for the first few games ... until I found out he was a

guy with long hair," as he laughed about the new reality in hockey. Were we witnessing the creation of a "thought process" that may follow a young player, a young male player, straight into the NHL?

The boys are learning control. They don't do it begrudgingly. They do it instinctively, with the voices of their parents ringing through their subconscious minds. "Never hit a girl." Since a ponytail is not visible from the front, they now think first before they check anyone.

On one hand, we have a young female defenseman, wearing a jersey two sizes too large and skating against players twice her size, who is fearless and focused. She is aware that hockey means body checks and possible injury. But she and the boys now stand in the aisles at school and talk hockey. She is learning that it's not just a man's world and she will carry that sense of equality with her throughout her life.

On the other hand, we have young men learning that sugar and spice and everything nice are not the sum total of a girl's makeup. Snips and snails and puppy dog tails - and hockey sticks - are thrown into that mix as well. They accept the arrival of the girls, even though it means they will instinctively be pulling back. From speaking with these young men, one sensed no resentment, no trace of a thought that perhaps a girl on the ice may be ruining the game.

Our children just take it for granted that the archaic wall between the sexes is crumbling. Every time a young woman digs her skates into the ice and, in a mixed league, waits for the puck to drop, a few more bricks from that wall hit the ground.

And our sons are learning to hesitate, perhaps just enough to cool a frayed nerve or stop the gloves from being dropped. Perhaps that briefest of moments will be enough to prevent a player from sucker-punching an opponent into a broken neck in future NHL games.

When we enter the playoff season hockey re-emerges more as a game of skill than of kill. The game is no less interesting because no gloves litter the ice and the penalty box is empty. We will watch a game where players might, for a change, pull back from retaliation and fists of rage. They will play the same game as our young sons alongside girl players, a game where brawn and intimidation don't rule.

Maybe a bunch of kids, kids who only want to play hockey, can teach the NHL a lesson or two.