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The New, High Scoring NHL?

By Paul Mrocza

The NHL decided to go retro this year. That's right. It's not so much that they instituted new rules; rather they went back to some old ones. The hoped for result has happened—scoring is up 24% from 2003–04.

Is the game more exciting? It seems to be. Are goaltenders and defensemen at a greater disadvantage than they were the last time the league produced a season of hockey? Definitely. The game has opened up for numerous reasons. The prohibition of the two–line pass is gone and that has opened up more chances for exciting playmaking. Now a defenseman who is still in his own zone can now shoot a pass to a winger breaking across the red line who catches it and continues over the blue line, shooting the puck on net. In past seasons that winger would have been whistled for connecting with a two–line pass and the play would have been dead.

For off sides there's the "tag–up rule", which allows offensive players who have preceded the puck into the attack zone to tag–up or touch the blue line and continue with play. Before, if a player were off sides the play would be stopped immediately. The new tag up rule has meant fewer whistles stopping the flow of the game.

When players are allowed to continue a play, as they are with these rules, there's the chance for more shots and more goals. The NHL has noted that the number of shots on goal is also up.

One decision that has opened up the game but initially also slowed it down relates to defensive play, specifically what a defenseman can and can't do. Prior to the start of the season officials were told by the league to pay special attention to interference, holding, hooking—any obstructive play. Especially at the start of the season there seemed to be an almost constant din of whistles, but as teams adjusted to the tighter calls, defensemen started relying more on stick work and there have been fewer whistles.

Of course with more calls against defensemen the number of power plays, which open up play even more, rose, thus gives teams a better shot—literally and figuratively—at scoring. Some players, former players, and commentators have been extremely vocal about this change. They feel it's almost as if

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the defense has to ask permission before it asserts itself.

The fact is that "goon" defenseman just won't cut it in the league anymore. In order to be effective at stopping the offense, players now have to utilize finer skills such as poke checking.

Another rule instituted to dissuade obstruction of play states that anyone instigating a fight in the final five minutes of a game will receive a game misconduct and a one-game suspension. This rule enforces the desire of the league to keep play unhampered and the game moving.

Then there's the incredible shrinking goaltender, who is now 11% smaller. Has truncating the net-minder's equipment really had much effect? Overall the bulk of the goalie's gear has been reduced by 11% and sweaters and pants are also less bulky. Pads have been reduced by an inch and gloves and blockers aren't as large. When you think about it logically such a reduction probably hasn't had much of an influence on the rise in scoring.

Consider the fact that NHL goaltenders are amazing athletes capable of going to the right, making a pad save and then rushing to the other side of the net to stop a wrap around. They'll do the butterfly and immediately be back on their skates, ready for the rebound. They possess extraordinary reflexes, having to wait till the last millisecond before they react to a shot. If anything, the reduction of bulk may have made these denizens of the crease more mobile and more effective.

A decrease of size in goaltending equipment would probably have a drastic effect if the league went back to the 70's and early 80's when pads weren't much wider than the tender's legs and anyone who wore a mask looked like Jason from the Friday the 13th movies. Diminutive gear would certainly result in more goals and probably more injuries to goalies.

Goaltenders have been made more vulnerable to scoring because of the limits the NHL has imposed on handling the puck. If a goalie freezes the puck unnecessarily then he can be called for delay of game. Additionally, the NHL's creation of a trapezoid area demarcating the only space behind the goal line that a tender can handle the puck means that shooters have more access to the puck and greater opportunity to make plays.

In past seasons goaltenders could handle and freeze the puck more often, which meant they could keep it away from the offense before a winger ever had a chance to shoot. Now net-minders must wait for the shot more often, making them more reactive than proactive.

Finally, along with the incredible shrinking goaltender there's the amazing expanding offensive zone. Neutral ice has been compacted and the offensive zones have been extended by four feet, creating more attack space, greater offensive mobility, and a lot more ice for the defense to cover, especially on the power play.

This season the team that has really taken advantage of having more open ice and less opposition is the Ottawa Senators who have scored 185 goals in 44 games. The Senators could score 350 or more goals this season. That's something that hasn't been done in a decade.

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The game has opened up and so too has the net. More scoring chances, fewer whistles, and ongoing play have combined to make life tougher for the defense and sweeter for the shooters. The result is fans are enjoying more action, which makes them the ultimate winners.

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The NHL hockey season just keeps slipping away.

By Catherine Kenyeres

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According to Gary Bettman, the prevailing NHL hockey commissioner, during a recent interview with TSN, the Canadian cable sports network the NHL hockey season is just slipping away. He is not confident that a settlement between the players' union can be reached soon. Bettman maintains that the NHL needs a strong economic system and the owners will wait until such a pact is secured that ensures the league's viability.

Furthermore, Bettman reiterated to TSN the NHL league's dismal financial position. Both the owners and players argued whether or not the financial troubles indeed exist. The players' union emphatically denies that the owners have any financial difficulty at all. Given this, it is hard for both sides to come to a unified solution when everyone on the face of the earth knows, except for the players' union, that the NHL is in serious financial trouble. Bettman says, "If at any point in time the union is interested in resuming formal negotiations, all they have to do is let us know and we'll be happy to re-engage."

And the NHL hockey season just keeps slipping away.

Catherine Kenyeres is a freelance writer and publisher for <http://www.best-4u-tickets.com>. Catherine has written numerous articles for the sports enthusiast.

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