



THE PUCK STOPS HERE

Protective arena netting: eyesore or eye protector

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For many Canadians, the arrival of fall means one thing – hockey season. This year, there has been much attention paid to Hockey Canada’s ban on bodychecking for players in the peewee age group or younger. Little attention has been given, however, to another group often injured at hockey games each year: spectators.

THE HISTORY

Spectator injuries are as old as the game of hockey itself, though response to the injuries has been a long time coming.

In the mid-1950s, **Conn Smythe** decided to replace the chicken wire fence at Maple Leaf Gardens with plexiglass after a fan was struck in the mouth and lost several teeth. Fast-forward almost half a cen-

tury to Winnipeg in 2000. **Louise Lanthier** was at her 16-year-old son’s hockey game when a player tried to clear the puck along the glass. Unfortunately for Lanthier, the puck came over the glass and struck her directly in the eye, damaging her eyeball so severely that it caused permanent loss of sight in that eye.

Shortly afterwards, Lanthier was saddened to learn of 21-year-old **Chad Hildebrand**’s death in Winnipeg. A shot flew into the crowd, glanced off a friend’s head and hit Hildebrand in the temple. He was taken to hospital, examined then released. Later, he collapsed at home and died one week following the injury. It was this news that turned Lanthier from Hockey Mom into Hockey Crusader.

Lanthier campaigned to have the City

of Winnipeg install protective netting at all its arenas. She felt the city should at least install the netting on half of each arena to give the spectators the option of sitting in a protected area. In 2000, Lanthier got her wish when the City of Winnipeg strung netting around the entire playing surface at 30 public rinks in the city. Total cost: \$44,000.

In 2002, the NHL Board of Governors followed Winnipeg’s lead under similarly tragic circumstances. Thirteen-year-old **Brittanie Cecil** died two days after being struck in the forehead by a hockey puck at a Columbus Blue Jackets’ game. Three months later, the NHL ordered the installation of protective netting and standardization of the minimum height of glass around the rink. Despite a league report finding its arenas to be safe, commissioner Gary

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Bettman said, "We're doing it because we think it's the right thing to do after what has happened."

Spectator deaths are rare at hockey games. Indeed, Cecil's was the first recorded death of a spectator at an NHL game in more than 85 years. However, statistics for hockey spectator injuries still tell a dangerous tale. One study found that during 127 NHL hockey games, pucks injured 122 people; 90 required stitches, and 57 required transport to hospital emergency room. That same study reported that women and children were 2.6 times more likely to be injured at a hockey game than adult males.

While those statistics make the decision to install protective netting at all arena facilities seem like a no-brainer, negative reactions from hockey fans have prevented rapid implementation in North America.

In 1993 (before the NHL mandated netting in all rinks) Calgary's Saddledome hung netting. The overwhelmingly negative reaction from fans brought the netting down after only one game. The difference between European and North American attitudes toward netting is marked. International Ice Hockey Federation official, **Szymon Szemberg**, saw the difference when attempting to install netting at The Peaks Ice Arena for the 2002 Olympics in Salt Lake City. "People in North America are no less aware of the danger than Europeans," he said, "but the business aspect is more important (to them) than safety."

Hall of Famer goalie **Ken Dryden** agreed, comparing the acceptance of protective netting at hockey games to the introduction of masks for goalies in the 1960s. "The first few times, fans would focus on the reality of it, just like people notice any change. Soon they wouldn't."

Bettman commented similarly to the New York Times: "In less than three minutes, people won't even know it's there."

The predictions of Dryden and Bettman appear to have been realized as, little more than a decade following the NHL's decision to install netting, the debate has diminished entirely.

facility owners over the injured parties as the assumption-of-risk concept generally applies, and — except under extraordinary circumstances — spectators injured by objects at sporting events almost never win damages.

In a 1986 judgment following a broken jaw suffered from a foul ball at a baseball game, a court stated, "spectators accept the inherent dangers in a sporting event and assume the risk of injury insofar as such risks are obvious and necessary." Seeing no discernible difference from a legal standpoint between a flying puck and a batted baseball, court rulings involving injuries to hockey spectators are similar.

In *Sawyer v State*, a hockey puck injured a 13-year-old girl. The court stated that "she admits to having seen pucks striking the [protective] net on her previous visits to the arena and...it cannot be said that a reasonably prudent person of [the plaintiffs] years, intelligence, and degree of development, would not have fully appreciated the danger and, hence... assumed the risk."



THE SASKATCHEWAN EXPERIENCE

The hundreds of community rinks located in Saskatchewan's urban municipalities are no exception to the issue of protective netting. The SUMAssure Insurance Recip-

rocal is in the process of completing risk-control surveys at 125 facilities across the province. All facilities insured under SUMAssure with a value of \$2,000,000 or greater are being surveyed to review exposures to loss including property-risk exposures such as fire and flood and general-liability exposures that could potentially be affected by the protective netting issue.

SUMAssure prides itself on its focus on risk prevention, control, and management rather than just collecting premiums and paying claims. SUMAssure does not rely exclusively on legal liability to determine whether or not a dangerous situation requires attention from a subscriber. Just because SUMAssure subscribers have common-law precedents on their side does not mean that our members simply accept 150-kilometre-per-hour flying projectiles as a fact of life in their facilities.

The four risk-control engineers conducting the surveys on behalf of SUMAssure have all recommended improvements to spectator protection including the height of glass above the boards and protective netting, and SUMAssure subscribers are taking notice and making improvements. This recommendation comes from one of the survey reports:

The current spectator seating arrangement allows for patrons to be accidentally



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LEGAL ISSUES

Liability for spectator injuries has shifted decidedly in favour of sports teams and



An example of a typical arena in Saskatchewan.

The CAN/CSA-Z262.7-04 (Guidelines for spectator safety in indoor arenas) is an excellent reference pertaining to the provision of netting.

struck by flying pucks. In order to protect against this commonly occurring event, consideration should be given to providing safety netting along the spectator sides of the rink.

The CAN/CSA-Z262.7-04 (Guidelines for spectator safety in indoor arenas) is an excellent reference pertaining to the provision of netting.

Additional protection should be provided if an object can travel in a direct line from the playing surface to an area where spectators and non-participants are located.



NETTING STANDARDS

SUMAssure's recommendation references the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) standard CAN/CSA-Z262.7-04, Guidelines for Spectator Safety in Indoor Arenas. That standard provides guidance on safety to owners and operators, architects, planners, engineers, construction companies, construction contractors and appropriate inspectors in the design, construction and operation of indoor

arenas. The standard is voluntary and is not retroactive.

The standard recommends a board and glass system permanently surrounding each playing area, with a minimum height of 2.4 m at the sides and 3.05 m at the ends of the playing area when measured from the playing surface.

Added protection systems may include a moveable board and glass system, or a moveable safety netting system.

It also outlines measures to consider when an object can travel in a direct line from the playing surface to areas for spectators and non-participants, including:

- highly visible warnings on signs throughout the premises;
- printed warnings on event tickets;
- game-time announcements warning of potential dangers; and
- advising spectators to pay attention to objects leaving the playing area during games.

SUMAssure supports the standard and views it as an excellent resource for those planning to improve protection for

spectators. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities also supports the standard.

You can find more information on netting and spectator protection in the Ontario Recreation Facilities Association (ORFA) Guidelines for Arena Dasherboards and Shielding Systems (2009).



THE COST

Each municipality's cost for protective netting depends on the configuration of a rink and its spectator seating areas. You can also choose from different materials, including Nylon, Kevlar and Monofilament. Black and white are the most common colors, with arena lighting affecting which color is best suited to your facility.

The 30 Winnipeg rinks outfitted for netting in 2000 were completed for less than \$1,500 per facility on average. Today, pricing is estimated at roughly \$5,500 to completely encompass a standard-sized rink with the latest fire-retardant indoor netting.

But the Cecil, Hildebrand and Lanthier families would likely agree that is a small price to pay. ▶

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