

March 6th, 2008

## **Helmet policy causes conflict at city rinks**

Posted by Kevin Kennedy

From <http://spacing.ca/wire/?p=2856>

The City of Toronto is having difficulty enforcing a six-year-old helmet policy, which has come under criticism in the city's south end. "We have had difficulties with Jutta Mason and the group that she represents," said City of Toronto supervisor of active living Kevin Mercer. "They don't like helmets and I'm not really sure why." Mason, an ardent public space activist, is a founding member of the Friends of Dufferin Grove Park. Though a three-phase helmet policy began in 2002, the issue came to the forefront when a ten-year-old child was killed while playing shinny hockey without a helmet in 2006 in Guelph. This season, City officials have made a heavy push for compliance at all outdoor rinks.

According to the City's "Helmet Policy For Ice Activities" which was approved August 16, 2002 and revised September 17, 2004, "All participants (preschool, children, youth, and adults) who participate in and play supervised shinny hockey, hockey, or power skate activities are required to wear Canadian Standards Association approved hockey helmets." Also noted in the policy is that staffers "are required to enforce this Policy and they are to ask participants to leave the ice if they do not have the required CSA approved hockey helmet."

It is uncommon to see players without helmets on most supervised rinks with fencing, boards, and nets, but on unsupervised outdoor rinks toques replace buckets. "Wherever there's no enforcement, there's no helmets," Mason claims. "As soon as people can, they tend to take them off."

Mercer admits that compliance with the helmet policy isn't as widespread as he had hoped. "There seems to be a couple of pockets where there is no compliance with the helmet policy and Dufferin Grove is one of them," said Mercer. "When staff are on duty they will try to enforce [the policy] but they are instructed not to get into confrontations with people." At Dufferin Grove there are staff supervisors but they aren't enforcing the policy. "[Jutta Mason has] her own thoughts on it and unfortunately she's having influence over other people," said Mercer. But what would happen if a shinny player at Dufferin Grove had a head injury? "Well I hope they'd sue the shit out of Jutta Mason," said Mercer laughing. "If you hurt yourself and you're not wearing a helmet, you're on your own in terms of insurance."

Mason's contention with the policy is rooted in a fundamental belief that shinny hockey is a sport that is played with minimal equipment. "Shinny is not a sport that's played with a helmet," said Mason. "We don't enforce [the helmet policy] at Dufferin and it's not enforced at most of the rinks around here," she said. Mason also disagrees with the legislative procedure of the policy and claims that recent enforcement of the rule has led to a significant decrease in attendance at city rinks. "It's amazing how in some places the shinny hockey scene has been semi-killed," Mason said. "The bike helmet discussion was going on for nine months and eventually the adult portion of the policy was removed. It was regarded as a pretty serious matter whereas with the helmet policy for outdoor rinks, these folks just had a meeting one day and just came out with that."

Supporters of helmet-less hockey argue that the city has yet to provide data on head injuries to shinny players. "They have no claims to back them up and they have no injury data," Mason said. "We asked for it and they said the decision wasn't based on data, it was based on the suspicion that there is data but they haven't got any." Mercer balks at Mason's argument. "You wear a seat belt in the car don't you? Would you let your kids ride without a seat belt? Why would you let them run loose on a hockey rink?" he said. "That's what they'll tell ya," responded Mason. "But it isn't the same. The interesting thing about the seat belt and the bike helmet policies is that there are provisions in the law that if you're going to change things then you must give people an opportunity to discuss it and this never was," said Mason. "The WHO said years ago that most people died falling down the stairs, but so far we haven't had legislation that says we have to wear a helmet while walking up or down stairs," said Mason.

One organization that does have data is the Greater Toronto Hockey League. As of this past January every team official is required to wear a C.S.A. helmet during all on-ice activities. The league cited statistics

gathered by USA Hockey that identified that since 1998 seven coaches in both Canada and the United States have died from head injuries, as a result of falling on the ice during practices. Additionally, in the United States alone, there were 47 documented head injury claims by coaches in one 12-month period.

Over at Dieppe rink in East York, nine-year-olds Andrew Alvarado and Chris McDonald haven't really considered playing shinny without a helmet. "I guess I'm used to it," said Alvarado who plays for the North York Knights minor atom 'A' team in the G.T.H.L. "They make us wear them," said teammate McDonald. "I don't really like it, but I guess it's safer."

If the City has its way, a helmet will join a stick, a puck and a pair of skates as basic ingredients for outdoor hockey in Toronto, but when heart battles head it's anybody's game.

-----

[Click here to read Kevin Kennedy's article, A pair of skates, a stick and a dream.](#)

Photo by tuchodi

[Permalink for Helmet policy causes conflict at city rinks](#)

Categories Culture, Parks, Behaviour, People, Neighbourhood

March 6, 2008 - 9:09 am

Kevin Kennedy

[Share this post](#)

[Email This Post](#) [Email This Post](#)

- \* [Share it on Facebook](#)
- \* [del.icio.us](#)
- \* [digg](#)
- \* [stumble upon](#)
- \* [technorati](#)

Comments

[14 comments](#) | [Leave a comment](#)

Neither the author nor Spacing necessarily agree with the comments posted below.  
Spacing reserves the right to edit or delete comments entirely. See our [Comment Policy](#).

"Well I hope they'd sue the shit out of Jutta Mason,"

Well someone needs to. She's been a total nutbar for years now, on various and sundry issues.

Oh Jutta. You're for protecting hockey players against the sight of an errant nipple, but you're against protecting them from injury. Ok, good. Just making sure.

Comment by Anan

March 6, 2008 @ 10:05 am

Getting children to wear hockey helmets is an issue? Really? And it warrants an entire article to discuss the issue? What year is this?

The NHL's helmet policy is nearly 30 years old (it was adopted in the 79/80 season), and I was living under the assumption that in those 28 years, we'd all basically agreed that ice was hard, heads were less so and contact between the 2 could prove dangerous. Somehow young children are exempt from physics because they're only playing for fun?

Why do cranks like this Jutta Mason have to take up any of our time? Does she have a kid? I wonder who she'd try to sue if her kid split open his head on a city rink?

Comment by Josh Hind  
March 6, 2008 @ 10:10 am

It's disturbing that the requirement for helmets is reducing interest in shinny hockey. Helmets are a good idea, but I've played shinny and I suspect that it's nonetheless quite safe without them. However, by pushing kids off the rinks when they have no helmets, the city may be driving them to other, more dangerous activities where there is no enforcement. Where's the data suggesting that, on balance, helmets protect kids?

Comment by Andrew  
March 6, 2008 @ 10:34 am

That's crap...helmets aren't going to be the demise of shinny hockey. Kids dying from cracked skulls and the resultant lawsuits have a pretty good chance, though. When the insurance to keep the rinks open gets too high for the city to afford the rinks, that will kill shinny.

Comment by Josh Hind  
March 6, 2008 @ 11:01 am

Josh, all I'm saying is, where's the data? We know that shinny participation is going down. How many kids have been killed playing shinny in the last ten years — one, maybe? What would they be doing if they weren't playing shinny? Is the requirement for helmets actually protecting kids, or shifting the problem somewhere else?

The only thing a lawsuit or insurance premium does is to encourage the city to dump its liabilities elsewhere, which is what is going on in this case.

Comment by Andrew  
March 6, 2008 @ 11:26 am

There are lots of these old-time activists around the city — they did good, even great things. Duff Park is wonderful. But sometimes they get kind of cranky and set in their ways, and go way off the mark.

Helmets, no brainer, no guff. Stick to the bread oven, Jutta.

Maybe the demise of shinny is due to the changing demographics and tastes of Canadian kids. What's the shinny version of Soccer? Bet that's way up. Times changes, let's roll.

Comment by Jen Cheunge  
March 6, 2008 @ 11:44 am

Just an observation that on the "world's largest outdoor skating rink" in Ottawa, most people skate without helmets. For some reason, helmets are required on tiny little rinks, but if you're skating on a lake or a canal, even if it's government-maintained, you're OK. Just saying there are inconsistencies here.

Comment by Charles  
March 6, 2008 @ 12:04 pm

Charles: You don't need to wear a helmet at Toronto rinks for recreational skating. Only for hockey, shinney, etc.

The Rideau Canal doesn't require helmets, but it's even more restrictive because you can't play hockey/shinney at all (except for special occasions...)

Comment by Vic  
March 6, 2008 @ 1:52 pm

I'm a big fan of what Friends of Dufferin Grove have done, but to fight against helmets to be worn during shinny is really dumb.

Comparing cycling helmets and hockey helmets is poor argument. Not matter how good of a skater you are, you're very likely to fall down at some occasion while playing, which can't be said about cycling. I don't think I've fallen off my bike in 2 or 3 years but ride 8 months of the year on a daily basis. Becuz hockey is a contact sport — and even shinny is contact — it can result in people colliding and falling, even by the best of players.

Specifically at Andrew: Data came out the other day showing neck guards and visors have seriously decreased injuries in the OHL, something like 40%. While not directly related to helmets, its the type of data that shows when you protect younger players, injuries will decrease. I don't know how you can demand data to show helmetless kids are more at risk than kids waering helmets — its common sense. Besides, most anyone who owns a pair of skates will most likely have a helmet too. Not all will own them, I realize, but most will.

If the city is concerned about decreased numbers then have the Parks Dept buy a whack of helmets, or sell its soul to CCM or Mission and have them donate hundreds to be 'rented' at outdoor rinks.

Comment by Matthew Blackett  
March 6, 2008 @ 2:19 pm

I'm not liking helmet enforecement of any type for adults.

It appears from the article that the city's helmet policy applies to adults as well (as opposed to cycling helmet laws, which mandate domes for children only).

Comment by Brad J.  
March 6, 2008 @ 2:30 pm

I think I'm for not forcing adults to not wear helmets, but I'm for not wearing a helmet automatically having that adult opt out of state funded health care in the event of an injury to said head.

Comment by Shawn Micallef  
March 6, 2008 @ 2:33 pm

Matt, thanks for the response. Of course helmets reduce injuries. I'm making the unintended-consequences argument: if you make kids wear helmets, those who choose not to will find something else to do with their time. Will that thing be more or less dangerous than playing shinny without a helmet? Is the city concerned with the kids or just the liability?

I also dispute the notion that helmetless shinny is inherently dangerous, or more so than any other sport. This isn't the OHL; players aren't out there hitting. Further, a helmet would not have prevented the (few, minor) injuries I've seen playing shinny.

Comment by Andrew  
March 6, 2008 @ 2:36 pm

I recognize it's not as tough as the OHL, but shinny played by kids can result in just as severe injuries. Hitting and "contact" are two different things. Incidental contact happens often in non-hitting games, and often results in worse incidents than if a hit was delivered. Often in shinny, people dodge to get out of the way and end up ass-over-kettle. Sometimes it's better to get hit. And when it comes to younger players — kids aged 8 to 15 — you know full well that without a referee out there kids will put themselves and others at risk to be like their hockey stars. I'm less concerned with adults wearing helmets, but as I've gotten older I'm more concerned with my safety than with my vanity. Helmets might be kinda dorky looking, but I like my skull intact.

I should add the disclaimer that I love hockey to death, played for 30 years, coached for 5 years during high school, and worked for 7 years at The Hockey News. This type of discussion is something we often debated during editorial meetings and casual office banter. The last thing I want to do is turn kids off from hockey or shinny, but I don't think forcing kids to wear a helmet is the cause for its demise. It's an easy excuse for folks like Jutta. I think it has more to do with the expense of hockey and the changing demographics, as mentioned above.

Comment by Matthew Blackett  
March 6, 2008 @ 2:57 pm

Judging by his recent comments I suspect that Rob Ford did not wear a helmet when playing shinny as a kid.

Comment by scott  
March 6, 2008 @ 3:14 pm