

# Why is fighting vanishing from the NHL?

By Chris Kuc, Chicago Tribune on 02.18.16

Word Count **1,166**



The Philadelphia Flyers' Pierre-Edouard Bellemare (left) is charged with goalie interference on the Toronto Maple Leafs' James Reimer (right) during the second period of a game at the Wells Fargo Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Jan. 19, 2016. Photo: Steven M. Falk/Philadelphia Inquirer/TNS

Before he became the darling of hockey with his heartwarming tale surrounding last weekend's NHL All-Star Game, John Scott was a polarizing figure in the league.

As the last of the game's true enforcers, teammates revered Scott for protecting them on the ice, while many fans who believe fighting should be eradicated from the game reviled him.

But here's the thing about fighting and Scott: In recent seasons he had difficulty finding anyone willing to drop the gloves with him. During his stint with the Chicago Blackhawks from 2010-12, Scott often would bemoan the fact opponents would turn down his pugilistic requests.

"It has gotten even harder these days," Scott, now with the Canadiens' AHL affiliate, said last week. "It's hard to find fights."

That follows a trend in the NHL, where fighting is down 16 percent from a year ago at this time, 35 percent from two seasons ago and 40 percent from the 2012-13 season.

According to the NHL, through Feb. 4 there were a total of 212 fights in a combined 767 games for an average of 0.28 per contest. Through 767 games of the '14-15 season, there were 259 fights (0.34 per game). Through the same number of games in '13-14, there were 332 (0.43) and 346 in '12-13 (0.45).

Those rather dramatic decreases came despite neither the NHL nor its players association calling for an end to fighting or implementing major rules changes to discourage bouts.

A byproduct of more and more players wearing visors to protect their faces from flying pucks — and in turn flying fists — is a factor, but while both sides have worked diligently to discourage head shots in part due to more awareness of concussions and chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), fisticuffs generally have been left alone.

So why, then, is fighting disappearing from the game?

“It may be a lot of factors,” NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman said. “Perhaps the predominant one may be, and this is my speculation, the game is so competitive now that teams are focusing more on skill and having four lines that can help you win a game.”

NHLPA Executive Director Donald Fehr said he believes fighting is down also because the game is evolving, but the competitive nature of the game and the emotions that go along with it means fighting is unlikely to disappear altogether.

“This is a very physical game where guys are expending a lot of energy and a lot of adrenaline,” Fehr said. “It can get really heated because at the elite level of this sport, if you’re not emotionally involved in the game and want to win as much as you can breathe, you’re not staying in this league.”

Of the fighting that does remain in the NHL, it has become mostly reactionary after a big hit — legal or illegal — or as a way for players to police the game themselves via retaliating against opponents for high sticks, slew footing, slashes or other perceived dirty plays.

“Are there times when there needs to be a fight? Yes, for sure,” Lightning forward Steven Stamkos said. “You have to police yourselves sometimes on the ice.

“(But) does it need to be staged and does it have to be this tough guy and that tough guy fighting just because they are two tough guys? I think that’s what has gone away from the game a little bit.

“When you see a fight now it’s a response, someone didn’t like something that was done on the ice. I think you need that. It’s healthy. With concussions and injuries you never want to see guys get hurt, but I still think there is a time and a place for it.”

Added Sabres center Ryan O’Reilly: “Fighting is something that will always have to be part of the game. It’s a game that’s played at such a high pace that sometimes guys are in vulnerable positions and you have to know not to hit in that area, and fighting is one of those things that stops that because if you hit a guy in a sensitive area you have to answer for that.”

While dwindling, fights also occur in attempts to change momentum or energize the players and crowd. Whether a fight is truly an effective way of doing either, players believe in it.

“When you see a guy sacrifice himself or put himself maybe in a vulnerable position when you have to do something like that, you know it takes some guts,” Islanders forward John Tavares said. “As a teammate you want to step up and respond to the role your teammate just took on and how he’s trying to get the team going and motivate the team.”

Scott, who has been in 38 fights during his eight-season NHL career, according to [hockeyfights.com](http://hockeyfights.com), said he’s positive he has swayed momentum throwing his fists.

“One hundred percent,” Scott said. “I’ve changed momentum many times in a game. The fear of a fight always changes the momentum of a game.”

While the threat of a heavyweight exacting revenge at times remains a deterrent to taking liberties with skill players, the days of staged fights — players setting up a fight in advance — are fading.

“The days of just squaring off at center and having nothing behind it ... are numbered for sure,” Scott said. “I never really was a huge staged-fight fan. Awake all night thinking about fighting some guy is not fun. I like the heat of the battle, getting in a scrum and pushing somebody and fighting after that. That’s the way hockey should be played.

“A lot of the guys who just went out there and fought are gone. The guys who are there now can play a little bit, they can skate and do different things than just going out there and fight.”

That means there likely won’t be a return of players whose main job is to drop the gloves, such as legendary pugilists Dave Schultz, Dave Williams, Lou Fontinato, Derek Boogaard and Stu Grimson, just to name a few.

“You’re kind of seeing the hybrid of guys who can play on that fourth line and also mix it up and fight a bit,” Hawks winger Patrick Kane said. “You need to be held accountable for certain things, and there is always going to be that part of the game ... to fire up your hockey team. It’s an important part of hockey.”

Does Bettman ever envision a time in which there will be no fighting in the NHL?

“It will be by evolution if that’s what happens,” Bettman said. “The players make clear to me that they don’t envision a change in the rules (now). All elements of the game evolve, and that’s no different.”

While many fans are divided on the issue, an informal poll at the All-Star Game in Nashville, Tennessee, did not reveal one player who wants fighting gone from the game completely.

“It’s going to continue to go down,” Scott said. “Hopefully it doesn’t ever go away.”

## Quiz

1 Read the following central idea.

The belief that fighting can be useful is still widespread among NHL players.

Which paragraph from the article BEST reflects this idea?

- (A) Of the fighting that does remain in the NHL, it has become mostly reactionary after a big hit — legal or illegal — or as a way for players to police the game themselves via retaliating against opponents for high sticks, slew footing, slashes or other perceived dirty plays.
- (B) “I like the heat of the battle, getting in a scrum and pushing somebody and fighting after that. That’s the way hockey should be played.”
- (C) Hawks winger Patrick Kane said, “You need to be held accountable for certain things, and there is always going to be that part of the game ... to fire up your hockey team. It’s an important part of hockey.”
- (D) While many fans are divided on the issue, an informal poll at the All-Star Game in Nashville, Tennessee, did not reveal one player who wants fighting gone from the game completely.

2 Which of the following details would be LEAST important to include in a summary of the article?

- (A) The era of staged fights appears to be over.
- (B) John Scott was not a big fan of the huge staged fights.
- (C) Many players still support fighting as a tactic to motivate a team.
- (D) The number of fights has steadily decreased over the last few years.

3 According to the article, each of the following has contributed to changes in how hockey is played EXCEPT:

- (A) more awareness of concussions and other head trauma
- (B) competitive teams that want players who can score as well as fight
- (C) the disappearance of staged fights and players whose main role is to fight
- (D) players becoming more respectful of referees and waiting for them to punish unfair plays

4 Which sentence BEST summarizes how NHL managers have had an impact on fighting in the league, according to this article?

- (A) They have avoided making rules, but they have set strong norms against fighting.
- (B) They have made clear rules about limiting fighting to protect players' health.
- (C) They have not taken a strong stance and have shown they will listen to the players' wishes.
- (D) They have allowed and encouraged fighting, seeing it as justified and crowd-pleasing.