

New USA Hockey Helmet Rule Implementation & Enforcement



As you know, USA Hockey changed its rule about helmets, specifically regarding the expiration of the helmet "certification" based on the HECC approval ratings. At the outset, it is important for parents to know that this issue is one involving their children's HEADS. In this day and age, the medical information regarding the consequences of concussions and their long term effects upon someone who has suffered a concussion is enormous. The age old belief that a young player, or anyone for that matter, could simply shrug off a concussive hit to the head with absolutely no consequence is simply incorrect. Concussions are perhaps the most common form of injury to contact sports players yet only recently has the medical information regarding the long term effects of concussions really been brought to center stage. In this vein, the ability to lessen the incidence of concussions or perhaps lessen the severity of concussions is of vital importance. The first step in the process for accomplishing these goals is to identify the importance of proper equipment for the head, namely the helmet. According to the literature, helmets are not designed to last forever nor maintain their protective qualities forever. USA Hockey has identified that helmets have a "useful" life and has amended its rules to reflect the manufacturer's and HECC's recommendations. Now, turning to our dilemma as officials and the implementation and enforcement of this rule, we all can see the difficulty with the rule itself. First and foremost, the player and his/her parents are responsible for wearing the proper equipment. The onus for doing so rests squarely on the player. Now I recognize that the younger the player, the more the responsibility rests on the parents. And perhaps parents require more awareness of the concussion issues but I would like to think that the parents have their player's safety issue as a priority.

Next, if an HECC sticker is affixed to the helmet, it will contain the effective date for that helmet. The rule indicates that an invalid helmet date should render the player ineligible for the game (Rule 304 states: (Note) HECC certification includes an expiration date on the sticker and a helmet that has an expiration date that has expired is no longer considered certified. The player may not wear a helmet that does not have a valid and current certification sticker). I appreciate that we all want the players to play but this is only part of the relevant statement. The actual statement is that we all want the players to play in as safe an environment as possible and this includes wearing the proper equipment. The underlined portion is obviously the remainder of the sentence.

If no sticker is affixed to the helmet, the officials are permitted to inspect the helmet to ensure it meets the safety requirements of a helmet. Visually, the officials will certainly be able to see if the helmet contains the necessary clips, snaps, chin strap, "J" hooks, ear flaps, etc., and if it does not, it is an equipment violation and the player shall be sent off the ice. Similarly, if a goalie mask or any facemask for that matter is of such a quality that a butt end of a stick could penetrate through the cage openings, that facemask is not permitted and that player shall be sent off the ice.

The issues officials face are readily apparent and are also difficult because the violations are of such character that the player may not be eligible for that game. Additionally, the time involved to visually inspect each and every helmet each and every game is a competing interest. Optimally, the players will utilize appropriate equipment and this will not be an issue.

We will discuss these and other issues during seminar season with all Illinois officials.