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Technology and Sport at the Crossroads

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**Reducing the Size of Goalie Equipment in the NHL; Increasing the Fairness of the Game**

The equality in professional sports is sometimes at risk when the social contract theory between players is disobeyed. One example of this is in the 2013 Superbowl, where the New England Patriots of the National Football League (NFL) were rumoured to have deflated the footballs for the game. This was controversial because of the advantage it posed towards the Patriots and their quarterback, Tom Brady. However, this has also happened in the National Hockey League (NHL) when some goalies noticed that the size of the equipment was making them look incredibly larger than what they look like off the ice. Goalies who were considered on the smaller side come out on the ice looking like 350-pound football players, and the bigger goalies admitted that it was a problem. They didn’t believe that it was fair that smaller goalies look even bigger than bigger goalies with all their equipment on. Therefore, they brought it up to the managers, who then suggested that there be a regulation on goalie equipment in the NHL. As a result, the reduction in goalie equipment was the right call in order to maximize the fairness of the game.

Many of the changes the league made was reducing equipment sizes where it doesn’t specifically cover and protect the goaltender’s body. These changes included alterations to the leg pads that targeted the area at and above the knee. The area from the knee to the pelvis was reduced by 10%, since that part of the body is protected by the pants. In addition, knee pads worn underneath the pads had to be maximum 2.5 inches thick, while the knee-strap pads had to be only 1 inch in radius. Also, the calf wing protectors can’t be attached to the pad at the back of the leg, instead of it previously being attached to the five-hole seam. The last major change to pads was that the width of the surface of the pad had to be no more than 10.5 inches. Moving on to the pants, the inner belts to keep the pants on had to be removed, though personally I don’t see the point of that, but a more useful change was majorly reducing the hip blocks on the side of the pants to only half an inch. In addition, there were changes made to arm and chest protectors, but since each chest protector is custom made (for the most part) to suit the goaltender’s body, it took much longer to decide how to reduce these sizes in order to optimize the fairness while still providing the right amount of protection. Likewise, the chest protector is also the area of equipment where goaltenders exaggerate the most to enhance the amount of area covered. To solve this inequality, the area that protects the clavicle can’t project outside the normal shape of the shoulders. This area must also be strapped properly so that the chest protector doesn’t rise up above the shoulders adding more coverage. In the lower area of the clavicle protection, it can’t be protruding from the armpit. In other words, the protection must be around the torso, and not the forming a web from the arm to the chest area of the protector. Finally, the rib protection must actually wrap around the ribs, without flaps or anything that can cause extra padding that doesn’t cover the body, extending out to cover more net on the sides of the body. There wasn’t much change to the catcher, but the blocker was made to not exceed a width of 7 inches, and the thumb area was shaved slightly. As for jerseys, goalie jerseys actually used to have extra material underneath and attached to the arms (between the arms and the body) to help catch pucks inside of it. This extra piece of material was called “cheaters”, and they were also part of the regulation change.

Certain pieces of equipment were solely there to make the goalie look larger, and there were many complaints coming from relatively larger goaltenders that proved certain goalies were using the equipment to look larger than they actually were. By wearing equipment that was technically too big for them, they look bigger and thus cover more of the net. In the NHL, goaltenders can reach a height of up to 6’7”, and some can be as small as 5’10”, their jobs are the same, though their approach to it may be very different. Goalies as big as Ben Bishop (6’7”) of the Dallas Stars can use more of a blocking style, where they rely on their size more to stop the puck, as opposed to their mobility, which goalies like Jhonas Enroth (who used to play for the Buffalo Sabres) would use. This is where much of the concern comes in, like with Mathieu Schneider, who is a special assistant to the executive director of the players’ union, saying, “I believe that your goalie should look the way he looks off the ice and that wearing equipment just to take up space is different than wearing equipment to protect. I think that’s the goal here is we want to give guys gear that protects them but also fits their bodies and not just eating up space to block pucks.” After implementing the new rules, executives and officials have actually noticed a difference in the visual size of the goalies around the league, which has created more diversity in the styles of the goaltenders.

Relying on skills like mobility comes with different tactics that may include coming out of the crease more to cut off the angle of the shooter, therefor lessening the amount of net they can see. Larger goalies may not have to do this because their size compensates for the net coverage while staying deeper in the crease. By reducing the size of the equipment, it brings out more of the athlete in the goalie, instead of just the player that blocks pucks. Mathieu Schneider explains, “when you look at the size and athleticism of guys today, at all positions but particularly in goal, these guys are incredible athletes. Gone are the days of the doughnut-eating, cigarette-smoking goalie.” Here, Schneider explains that the larger equipment hinders the mobility of the goalie, thus decreasing their athleticism. In addition to disturbing the goaltender’s mobility, it also challenges the ethics of the game. By manipulating their equipment just to have that extra edge on their opponents, it takes away from the spirit and justness of the game, where goalies may start to rely on the equipment changes to stop the puck instead of working on bettering their skills. This ties into the social contract theory because goalies have been wearing equipment to fit their frame, but as smaller goalies realize the disadvantage they have compared to bigger ones, they feel that they can even up the equality with equipment that makes them look even larger than the big goalies. As goalies are realizing this, some of them feel that it is unfair for them to be one size off the ice, but a completely different size on the ice. Since bigger goalies already have very customized equipment to fit their bodies, they feel that they cannot wear even bigger equipment because of the crazy sizes they would come in, and the lack of mobility they would have. Bringing up the unfairness of the equipment issue, these large goalies brought up their argument and proposed a solution, to which all goalies and managers were in agreement with.

Making the change to reduce equipment size for goaltenders was brought up by the goalies themselves, though the executives of the league didn’t find it a problem at all. In fact, they were all for adding more regulations to the equipment standards because it would result in a smaller amount of net being covered, and thus, logically, more goals would come of it. The league has noticed a decline in the amount of goals scored over the course of the past seasons in the NHL, and goals are what causes the entertainment for the fans. Schneider also mentions that in addition to improving the fairness of the game, “the idea is that it creates more goal scoring as well.” If the number of goals goes up, then there would be more fans of the game, spending money to attend games and watch them on TV, all resulting in a larger revenue for the executives. Therefore, the executives were all for these changes being made.

Only, these changes didn’t in fact cause an increase in the number of goals being scored, actually goals decreased even more. Now that the equipment was smaller, goalies could move much better, and learned to play the game relying more on their skill and will to stop the puck, instead of their size, and some people predicted that this would happen. Steve Valiquette, former NHL goaltender and current analyst for Madison Square Garden Network, explains “I remember (Devan) Dubnyk saying when he first got the pants and he said, ‘You know what? Goals are actually going to go down because we feel we can move better. That same thing happened when they brought the pads down. We used to have 12-inch pads, so when you’re standing up and you have your pads together, the puck would hit your pads off a dead angle and all of a sudden, you’ve got a long way down to get to the ice to cover the puck. And when the pads came down an inch, now we’re going down with the ‘VH’ and the reverse ‘VH’ and we’re already at the ice, so you’re not getting beaten on the initial shot and you’re all over the rebound.” Here he brought in some of the previous changes that have happened over the course of the years in the NHL, comparing it to the effect that this recent change will have on the scores and results of games.

This change slightly affected the number of goals allowed per game and the save percentages of the goalies. There were small improvements of save percentage, and a small decline in the average goals per game, but not any tremendous improvements and differences. However, this didn’t impact the number of fans attending games or watching them on TV, and it might have actually caused more fans to come. The edge-of-you-seat competition is a key attraction to those who crave the battle. Fans started to come watch the goalies, and would get more of a kick out of a great save instead of a goal. Goalies like Marc-Andre Fleury and Carey Price would draw a crowd for themselves alone, attracting lifelong fans of themselves and the team.

Even goalies who could carry their own show were for the reduction, but many hockey activists and followers were against the regulation change for goalie equipment. They questioned if these changes will even do anything for the game, other than make it more complicated with so many rules. The main question going on in this debate is whether it will actually make the game “better”. Obviously, goalie equipment has come a long way over the years, and there have been lots of changes made all around, but was the answer to this question to change the regulations? One proposed solution was to make the nets larger, but all goalies were against doing that. Others that were against the regulation change were smaller goalies who took advantage of larger equipment so they can cover more of the net. Their defense for keeping larger equipment was saying that they needed the extra padding to protect them from very hard shots. However, given that they lost the debate, smaller goalies re-learned how to play like they played when they got to the NHL, using their lack of size to jump around the crease and make saves when it looks like they are out of the play.

Having played hockey my whole life, and being a goalie for ten years, I personally like playing with smaller equipment rather than bigger. At 5’4”, many people comment on how small I am, but if I can stop the puck then I believe I can play anywhere, and likewise for others. Similar to what small NHL goalies say, I use my mobility and agility to get around the crease quickly and smoothly to compensate for my lack of size. I have never worn big equipment as I feel that it slows me down when moving and I’d rather sacrifice protection for speed. In fact, I’ve been wearing the same arm and chest protector since I was thirteen years old. I understand where the goalies who used bigger equipment are coming from, but I think that the NHL did one good by reducing the regulatory size of the equipment.

However, there is always a risk of increasing the injury rate when reducing the size and padding of equipment. Though goalies record the least amount of serious injuries, the amount of bruises received by shots is concerning. That is one thing that certain goalies are concerned about with the new regulations, especially when the manufacturers are on a tight schedule. Henrik Lundqvist of the New York Rangers expresses how that is his main concern, saying, “I don’t have a problem with change, as long as the safety is the main focus. You might be able to cut a few things but we are getting close to how much you can push it. Now because of the changes I’m getting hit in places where in the past I was protected. You have to remember that the game is so much faster now, and the players shoot the puck harder and with a quicker release because of the new sticks.” This is a concern of every goalie, at every level, but specifically at the professional level it is very important to ensure that safety is a priority.

There is much more technology involved in producing goalie equipment than many people think, where manufacturers have to take into account a broad range of specifications. Around the time of the reduction in equipment, manufacturers like Bauer, CCM, Reebok, Brian’s and Vaughn, were all working on newer technology and technological designs for leg pads and other pieces of equipment. Leg pads specifically are the most complicated piece because there can be so many types of pads, depending on the goalie and their style of play. Some goalies want pads that give huge rebounds, others want the puck to hit the pad and drop. Most goalies want their pads to be as light-weight as possible so it gives them the best opportunity to move around. There has been an increase in researched technology goalie pads since the reduction of equipment by the NHL, and these brands are quickly trying to come up with newer and better ways to improve not only leg pads but other pieces as well. Goalies want to get as much of an advantage as possible when it comes to using the proper equipment, so anything that the producers can do would be considered for the improvement of their game. Even if it means having a disproportional equipment to their body type.

Once they decided to actually change the regulatory sizes of goalie equipment, there was a conflict of when this change will kick in, and when the goalies will receive the equipment by. The change was set for the 2016-17 season, which was the season after the change was made into order. Breaking in equipment is very tedious and an uncomfortable situation for a time of up to a month and a half, so goalies all over the league were worried they wouldn’t have their equipment in time in order to break it in for the first game of the season, and even training camp for their respective teams. Mike Vaughn, who is the owner and president of the brand *Vaughn*, expressed his concern for getting the equipment out in time: “The time line is very tight. We really do need more time and the players need more time so they can practice and get use to any changes, plus if it goes beyond just size of gear such as thickness or shape of a product we need time to test to make sure protection is not compromised.” Personally, if I were to get new equipment for the season, I would want to get it in early August so that I have a good month of practices breaking everything in before I am evaluated in it.

Many NHL and other pro goaltenders receive new sets of equipment multiple times a season whether they ask for it or not. Likewise, many players also receive large amounts of equipment throughout the season. The difference is not in the amount of equipment they get, but in the alterations of the equipment they get. Almost every piece of goalie equipment can be altered and customized specific to the goalie’s needs and wants, whereas a player’s equipment can only be customized in certain areas. Since goalies have the ability to customize their equipment so much, they can, more slyly, exaggerate their needs and wants to suit a goalie with a bigger frame, thus adding more protection even though they don’t necessarily need it.

The reduction in the size of goalie equipment in the NHL has been a result of all the collective arguments, complaints, and goals for the league in future years. With the changes in place, there hasn’t been any real increase in the scoring among the league, any publicized injuries among goaltenders, or complaints among players, coaches or fans. However, it does bring back the need for elite skill amongst goaltenders, and thus creating a better game.

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