

## Contact at Novice Box Lacrosse: Savvy or Savage?

Over the past couple of years, the topic of removing body contact at novice lacrosse has been a fairly front lined issue. With growing concerns for concussions and effects on young, growing bodies, it is no shock to see that parents and administrators are taking a serious look at the exposure to contact in sports for kids as young as 8 years old. You may be thinking, “Who would subject their 8 year old to a contact sport?”

The answer is “quite a few.”

Box lacrosse has been a contact sport since its creation. The physical nature of the game provides a unique balance to the grace and finesse that this game is known for amongst anyone who has ever picked up a lacrosse stick. This is why the game is so captivating at first witness, and deepens with every exposure that follows.

That being said, I’m not going to simply use heritage to hold a position for contact at Novice. The fact that we are talking about a young player’s (and their parents’) potential to make widespread judgement about an entire sport based on a single bad experience means we need to go deeper into the subject.

Why is contact part of lacrosse in the first place? After all, there are a handful of very successful lacrosse players that don’t lay a hit on anyone for years at a time!

There are two reasons body contact is used in lacrosse. Firstly, contact is used to aid in dislodging the ball in order to regain possession. The skill level of the average player in our game continues to progress at very impressive rates. Cradling has become as natural as breathing for many players, and the skill level is simply too advanced to expect a defender to accurately stick check their opponent, with surgical precision, while avoiding stick contact with the head, neck and hands. Removal of body contact naturally increases the amount of incidental stick contact, and thus presents a different issue for preserving safety for the players.

Secondly, body contact is ingrained in the nature of the game. With 10 players competing for floor position in a confined area, contact is inevitable part of game play. Whether we look at a novice game, or a senior game, we see that the contact element is a part of how the defense contains the opponent in order to prevent a scoring chance or a mismatch on the floor. With the speed of this game, proactive defenders are the most effective defenders.

If contact is part of the game, why can’t we adapt the game so every 8 year old can fall in love with the game without having a bad experience in their first year?

The fact of the matter is, waiting longer to introduce contact doesn’t always aid in the long term development process for the players, coaches and officials. When the above two reasons for contact are effectively taught at Novice, kids learn to perform their checks safely and effectively with the purpose of obtaining the ball or preventing an opposing player from getting to the goal. These lessons are a far cry from the perception that contact is about “destroying

your opponent.” If introduced early, these lessons can be learned while the children are smaller, lighter and less likely to be aggressive while performing a check. When kids reach 10 years of age, there is also a much larger spread in the size of the players, presenting yet another safety variable. Learning to deliver and absorb contact with players that are nearly twice your weight can be daunting for the players.

In addition to the teaching of why contact exists in the game, it is important to look at where a child’s emotional intelligence is at 8 versus 10 or even 12 years old. The older the child is, the more emotional competency they have, but they are also closer to experiencing a big hormonal shift. This can lead to more emotionally charged decisions in reaction to a situation. If we give new players and parents the impression that the rules will always protect the player, we set them up for anger and disappointment when the player graduates to peewee and realizes that they also have a part in protecting themselves. The core of this concern is safety, and the most effective way to ensure safety is to educate early, and educate thoroughly.

The last element of this process falls on the referees. If a Tyke or Novice referee does not enforce contact related rules (roughing, cross checking, interference, etc.) then the lessons about contact are undermined and affect the understanding of these values. Many of the first year referees we have mentored or instructed in past years have been told to “make the call, even when you’re not 100% sure what the right call is. If you can see that it’s not safe or fair, make a call.” Player safety is above all else, and when referees understand that their role is to preserve safety and fairness, contact related non-calls at Novice become a significantly smaller issue.

Concussions and contact related safety is an issue that faces lacrosse, hockey, football, rugby and a variety of other sports. The game isn’t to blame, just as no one single group is to blame. It is the responsibility of our communities to slow down our rush to a winning record and get back to the basics of the game. Teach the elements properly, and enforce the rules properly. This is the way to ensure the game is played, in all its beauty, for decades to come.