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# Inside the NHL's process for player discipline

By [Amalie Benjamin](#) | GLOBE STAFF DECEMBER 11, 2013



JENNIFER TAYLOR FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

**The staff at the Department of Player Safety watches every single NHL game, with some plays needing further review.**

NEW YORK — As Shawn Thornton’s fist connected with the head of Brooks Orpik, a set of eyes watched from 200 miles away. On two screens, one with the Bruins’ NESN feed, one with the Penguins’ Root Sports feed, NHL Department of Player Safety coordinator Peter Draney saw the punches land.

Perhaps 10 minutes later, the e-mail went out.

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The e-mails consist of four lines, four pieces of information crucial to the decision-making process, along with clips from both teams’ broadcasts: What happened? Was there an injury? What is the player’s history of supplemental discipline? When does the team play next?

The e-mail goes out to perhaps a dozen people — to Brendan Shanahan and Brian Leetch, to Stephane Quintal and Patrick Burke, to NHL director of media relations John Dellapina, and to the half-dozen people who spend their nights watching every

second of every game played in the NHL.

It happened last Thursday night, when Montreal's Max Pacioretty slammed Johnny Boychuk into the boards. It happened on Saturday night, when Thornton slew-footed Orpik and punched him repeatedly while the Penguin was down on the ice, and when Pittsburgh's James Neal kneed Brad Marchand in the head in the same game. It happened, too, on Sunday night, when Toronto's Dion Phaneuf crunched Kevan Miller into the boards from behind.

## **How NHL reviews controversial plays**

The player safety division of the NHL examines questionable plays and determines if additional discipline is required. Here is the process that an incident like Shawn Thornton's undergoes.

Those e-mails, which number 800-plus each season, result in a one-word response from Shanahan, who is the NHL's senior vice president for player safety: "Thoughts?"

So begins the process of trying to effect change in a league that seems resistant to it. As players and management cling to tough hits and vigilante justice, Shanahan and his team work not only to punish the bad acts but to alter a culture that sometimes seems to encourage them.

"We understand that when you're trying to make a big change in a game in which things have been done a certain way for a long time and there are constantly new players coming in, I think that it takes a while," said Shanahan last Thursday night, when the Globe spent the evening in the player safety room, reviewing games with his team. "It's not an overnight thing."

### **Thinking ahead**

The room is on the 12th floor of the Manhattan building that houses the NHL offices, near Rockefeller Center. At the sweet spot of the night, it is an assault on the senses, up to 25 screens showing every NHL game being played at the time.

Hockey broadcasts blare from the speakers, so it's easy to get caught up in, say, Dallas-Toronto while sitting in front of Boston-Montreal. Each person is assigned only one game to watch at a time, not only for the big incidents but also for more subtle things — for clean hard hits and accidental collisions, for good decisions and dangerous trips, even for announcer commentary.

All of it is done in an effort to evolve a sport caught between a code that doesn't always work and the violence inherent to the sport.

“There doesn't seem to be a pattern,” said Shanahan, the NHL's senior vice president of player safety. “There hasn't been a pattern that I've picked up on yet. I just think it's a hard thing to change a culture even when the players ultimately want that culture changed.

“I'll be the first to say that beyond a few isolated hits that we've seen, most players are getting it. Most players are grasping it.”

But are they?

It's a difficult question to answer, with only anecdotal evidence on either side. This week, certainly, has not been a shining example of progress. But, as Shanahan said, “It's like going to the airport and watching safe landings. Nobody notices when the planes land — it's always when something bad happens.”

“Generally there's a positive feeling,” Bruins general manager Peter Chiarelli told reporters at the Board of Governors meeting Tuesday. “I think the job is obviously a difficult one.

“We, the Bruins, have just kind of been through a funky weekend of a lot of incidents, and we play a physical brand, so understandably we seem to be part of it a lot, either the recipient or the perpetrator.

“Maybe I'm not the most partial guy right now to speak on it, but they do a good job.”

Shanahan knows he won't reach all of the current players in the NHL. He knows the culture is ingrained in them from a young age.

But his job and his videos and his rulings are not just for the current players in the league. They're also for a next generation watching when Pacioretty boards Boychuk and Neal knees Marchand and Thornton punches Orpik.

It is those people he ultimately wants to reach.

"The very glass-is-half-full, optimistic hope is that we get players coming into the NHL that understand, have a greater understanding and appreciation, respect for a player when his back is turned and he's near the boards, for body checking in a manner that isn't necessarily targeting another guy's head," Shanahan said.

"And I think the glass-is-half-full hope is that when they come into the NHL, they've had fewer head injuries growing up because of this — that while they play in the NHL, they are healthier and that they leave the game healthier."

## **Transparent process**

To that end, the NHL has instituted a measure of transparency that is generally anathema to major sports leagues, a transparency that allows it — hopefully — to educate those it is trying to reach, while holding them accountable.

"As a player, I think it's nice to have the person that's planning the discipline out willing to explain his decisions," said Bruins center Chris Kelly, who was involved in a hit this year that resulted in a suspension to Florida's Jesse Winchester. "That's not always the case in life. People don't always explain themselves."

That transparency is also "keeping ourselves honest," as vice president of player safety Damian Echevarrieta said. "When we're on the fence about a play, we'll often say, 'Can we make a video explaining why we're suspending this guy?' And if the answer is no, then we don't suspend."

"To have to actually prove with the video, with the money shot, with the exact spot shadow, with the exact rules, it really keeps us honest and consistent with past rulings."

The Boychuk and Thornton incidents illustrate how the player-safety team handles such moments. Both cases resulted in Shanahan seeking opinions from the group. But the Boychuk hit stopped there. The sentiment in the room was that there should be no

supplemental discipline. It went no further.

“Looks like he turns just after,” said Echevarrieta, running the room in Shanahan’s absence. “This is a unique one.”

That wasn’t the only play that the team clipped from the Bruins-Canadiens game. They also took a look at a later boarding situation, Dougie Hamilton on Brandon Prust, after Burke called Echevarrieta’s attention to it. It was, they said, a good comparable to reference when discussing the Pacioretty hit.

The Thornton situation in the Bruins-Penguins game was different. Thornton received a match penalty, which brings an automatic suspension, and after the game, Chiarelli and Thornton were alerted that the player would have an in-person hearing, making him subject to a suspension of more than six games.

Thornton’s actions were more blatant than many of the hits ruled on by the player-safety team. Those are mostly a matter of degrees, of inches, plays that would have been clean had a player turned a fraction of a second sooner or not left the ice or moved his head.

And it was a matter of inches that made the Pacioretty hit unworthy of additional discipline, something the Bruins agreed with, even in the emotional aftermath of Boychuk being removed on a stretcher.

“We can’t make up rules,” Shanahan had said. “I always say to people there are certain things I agree with and disagree with in here, but at the end of the day, it’s like a judge saying I happen to believe this. Doesn’t matter. You have to follow the law.”

As with Matt Cooke’s infamous hit on Marc Savard in 2010. Shanahan praised former safety czar Colin Campbell for his handling of a situation that still rankles Boston people.

“The controversial decision that Colin Campbell made to not suspend Matt Cooke for hitting Marc Savard was a brave one in my mind,” said Shanahan, “because it didn’t break a current rule in the NHL rule book. And by taking the storm that followed, by not just making something up, he actually made a bigger impact on the game of hockey.

“Two weeks later, there was a brand new rule for an illegal check to the head. He couldn’t undo what happened to Marc Savard.”

## **See for yourself**

The room, with its information overload, has an open-door policy. If players want to come in and see what the department of player safety does, how the staff watches games and notes plays, they are welcome to do so. In fact, it would probably help.

And yet just three players have taken them up on it, including bad boy Raffi Torres and former Bruin Andrew Ference.

“I think the guys are busy and have other concerns in their careers,” said Shanahan, who played more than 1,500 games in the NHL and entered the Hall of Fame this year. “You don’t think about player safety until you’re on the receiving end or the giving end of one of these most often, unfortunately. And I understand that.

“Try to reach most 24-, 22-, 26-year-old professional athletes who feel invincible.”

The room is much more often visited by reporters and by representatives of other leagues looking at the way the NHL doles out justice.

“I would say that I think it would be good for every player to come in and see how we do this,” Shanahan said. “But am I disappointed that they don’t? Am I shocked that they don’t? No. And I understand why they don’t.

“I don’t think I would have, quite honestly, until I was facing a hearing and I had some questions about how things are done.”

That’s where the video explanations of suspensions come in, an idea credited to commissioner Gary Bettman that was instituted during the regime change from Campbell to Shanahan three years ago.

“We think the video is a way for us to get our message to the players and actually show what went wrong,” Echevarrieta said. “Because all hits — unless they’re really bad — everybody is doing everything right at one point and then there’s a point where it goes wrong.

“And to be able to point that out, I think, really goes a long way with players understanding what’s happening.”

But that’s only if they’re paying attention.

“I think the climate is better,” said Chiarelli, who referenced changes that Marchand has had to make in his style of play since being suspended for five games for a hit on Vancouver’s Sami Salo in 2012. “The temperature is better for all this stuff, and we’re trying and the players are trying and we’re more aware of it.”

## **A busy month**

The problem with all of this, ultimately, is that there doesn’t seem to be a decrease in questionable decisions, in dirty hits, in violence. Just in the past week — just in games involving one team, the Bruins — there have been incidents that will have resulted in three hearings with the Department of Player Safety: for Neal, who received a five-game suspension, Phaneuf, who got two games, and Thornton.

And that doesn’t include other egregious moments from this season: John Scott’s elbow to the head of Loui Eriksson, goalie Ray Emery’s “fight” with fellow goalie Braden Holtby, and Patrick Kaleta’s hit to the head on Jack Johnson.

As Dellapina explained, “One of the mandates of the Department of Player Safety is to change behavior, not just punish bad acts. And so the way they’re going to learn is by seeing exactly what was suspendable.”

It’s just difficult to know whether the players are truly getting the message.

After 10 suspensions in October, there were just three in November. But in December? It appears this month will bring more unwanted attention to the department, more discipline than anyone in the NHL would like.

“In the past, it used to be referred to as ‘the guys who do the suspensions,’ ” Echevarrietta said. “We try to make it more than just suspensions. We try to make it about changing behavior so we don’t have suspensions. So, rather than punish guys, be proactive and get a message to them.”



That includes giving warnings to players whose actions didn't quite rise to the level of a suspension, reaching out to let them know how close it was, why it was close, and why it didn't result in additional discipline.

There are some shining successes; the Cooke story comes to mind. But there are also failures, with Kaleta waived by Buffalo and assigned to the AHL, though there were reports that he had cleaned up his game before tearing his ACL.

Shanahan points out that dirty hits make up just a small percentage of the hits delivered each year in the NHL. There are, he said, 55,000 in a season. The last full season in the NHL saw nine suspensions in the preseason, 35 in the regular season, 13 in the postseason.

He pointed out, too, that they are watching — every night, every minute of every game. They are closely reviewing, usually, seven or eight plays in any given night, far more than turn into hearings.

They are doing their best to change the perception of their department, to answer accusations of inconsistency and favoritism, and through that, change the culture of a sport that doesn't always seem to want to change.

“Our department had to earn trust that we were capable, and also we had to have enough history to establish standards,” Shanahan said. “It's still not a perfect system, but for now it's as thorough as we can get.”

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