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HEADLINE: Refs: Parents may not like it

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Minor hockey referees are getting ready for a major headache.

They're concerned that Hockey Canada's decision on the weekend to adopt the NHL's tough new approach to stick fouls and obstruction will be difficult to introduce and enforce.

Among their worries is the potential for additional battles with hot-tempered parents unhappy at seeing their child caught up in a penalty parade.

"I would like to think the parents will buy into it, but when it impacts their kid and he is sitting out then I (the referee) am a bad person," said Dave Wedlake, who has been officiating in the Ontario Minor Hockey Association and junior hockey for more than three decades.

"It's a huge challenge - one I believe in and am looking forward to."

There will be other challenges. More penalties means longer games - a huge issue when ice time is rented by the hour and hard to come by. And there's the difficulty of teaching officials the new standards and ensuring they enforce them consistently.

Last season, there were more than 8,100 officials certified by the OMHA, Greater Toronto Hockey League, The Alliance and Ontario Hockey Association in and around southern Ontario. Over the next four months, they and thousands of other officials across Canada will be asked to attend clinics to prepare for the changes.

"For us, it will be a massive education process," said Wedlake.

"The NHL is in a different world than we are. ... The NHL has only 600 players and 85 of the best officials in the world. We in Canada are dealing with thousands of officials, hundreds of thousands of players and their parents and we all have to buy in to this to be successful. It's a trickle-down effect."

Kevin Boston, the OMHA's director of marketing and communications, predicted it "will take a while - maybe a few years - to have it all filter down."

In the meantime, the changes will have an instant impact on the length of games.

"All our GTHL games (between 10,000 and 12,000 per season) are played in prime time and we don't have enough ice now and ... and there won't be a bunch of new rinks appearing before next season. We could have three curfewed games a night or have to cut it to two games a night," GTHL referee-in-chief Brian Coles said.

"Maybe the league will have to cut the schedule."

Dave Lichacz, who has been officiating for about 25 seasons in the GTHL, also predicted there will be a lag time before parents embrace the new rules.

"It will be frustrating at first until they get used to it," he said, comparing it to the introduction of the checking-from-behind rule.

"At first there was moaning and groaning and for a year or so they didn't understand the rule. ... Once The Times Union (Albany, New York)the referees became more consistent and called it properly, first the players accepted it and then the parents ..."

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