

Sports Hockey

Junior hockey lawsuit could change amateur sports



By [Mike Zeisberger](#), Toronto Sun

Monday, October 20, 2014 10:12:54 EDT PM



A civil lawsuit has been filed against the Canadian Hockey League for allegedly underpaying players. (DEREK RUTTAN/QMI Agency)

David Branch calls it a "coincidence" that the Canadian Hockey League meeting being held on Tuesday just happens to be taking place only 24 hours after a civil action lawsuit was filed against the organization.

Fair enough. But you can still expect the topic to be added to the agenda of issues being discussed at the gathering, which will involve representatives of the Western Hockey League, Ontario Hockey League and Quebec Major Junior Hockey League. Branch admits as much.

Just don't expect officials to emerge from the room after the get-together has been completed with all the definitive answers to the questions the legal action brings up.

As Branch said in a phone interview on Monday night, there will be no knee-jerk reactions for a subject that is very fragile.

"We feel our players are amateur student athletes," Branch said. "As such, feel we provide the best playing experience to our 1,300 players thanks in part to our various educational and on-ice programs.

"This is something that could not only change the landscape of our league, but it could change the landscape of other amateur sports as well."

And there's the rub.

The suit seeks financial compensation for allegedly underpaid players, claiming they financially receive less than the minimum wage in their respective regions. The suit also maintains that the players should, in addition, collect holiday, overtime and vacation pay.

According to the lawsuit, the average OHL player receives \$50 per week while devoting 35-40 hours per to their craft.

In a way, it's the same dilemma the NCAA is grappling with south of the border, especially when it comes to its big-time football and basketball programs. In essence, the debate wonders: Is it time to pay players? And if so, how much?

Are we talking apples and oranges here? Perhaps. At the same time, the debate over financial reciprocation, whether it be to a star quarterback of the Florida State Seminoles or the stud centre of the Soo Greyhounds, is the common thread.

Georgia running back Todd Gurley, for example, has been indefinitely suspended by the school and NCAA for allegedly accepted money from a man in exchange for a cache of memorabilia the Heisman Trophy candidate had signed. In the process, it has sparked a heated debate in U.S. college sports, one in which the question is being asked: "Why shouldn't players be paid when the schools are filling 80,000-seat venues and scooping all the revenues thanks to their performances and their images."

A similar argument is being made in the legal action being taken against the CHL, which alleges teams are "unjustly enriched" with "hundreds of millions of dollars in revenues annually" based on the services provided by those young kids out on the ice.

The moral of the story here: Branch hit the nail on the head when he suggested amateur sports as we know it could be changed forever based on this ruling.

Little wonder the CHL will "vigorous defend" its setup, with Branch leading the charge.

Stay tuned.

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