

Concussion laws passed in Ontario to protect youth athletes

Rowan's Law aims to change "concussion" culture and includes education, training, codes of conduct.



Rowan Stringer was 17 when she died after suffering a head injury while playing rugby in 2013. An inquest found the teen had been playing through multiple concussions before her death. (FACEBOOK)

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Young athletes are now protected by legislation to help prevent concussions and ensure their coaches and parents are better informed on how to handle head trauma.

Called Rowan's Law — named after Ottawa-area teen Rowan Stringer who died of injuries she suffered playing rugby — the bill mandates training for coaches, players and their families, a system to track injuries as well as a requirement that sports leagues and school boards implement codes of conduct.

“We want parents who sign up their daughter or son for a sport in school or outside of school to know that all steps are being taken to ensure the child's safety,” said Tourism, Culture and Sport Minister Daiene Vernile. “We want our kids to come home for dinner after practice or after having played a game that day.”

“These are critical steps to make certain that athletes are safe,” Vernile said in an interview.

The law — created and supported with the help of three MPPs, one from each party — passed Tuesday with unanimous support as Rowan's parents Gordon and Kathleen looked on in the Legislature. It now just needs royal assent.

Years in the making, the bill arose out of recommendations from an inquest after Rowan's death in 2013, as well as the work of Rowan's Law Advisory Committee, in which Gordon Stringer played a key role alongside former NHLer Eric Lindros.

A teary Gordon Stringer told reporters he hopes the legislation sparks changes beyond the province.

“The heavy lifting has been done here in Ontario,” he said. “This is something that needs to be addressed across the country.”

Vernile said she believes the new law will “change the culture” around head trauma, so athletes who are injured are recognized as having concussions and given the proper time to heal before returning to their sport.

Progressive Conservative MPP Lisa MacLeod (Nepean-Carleton), who was instrumental in bringing about the committee work and legislation, said parents will notice the difference.

Since she's started this work "there's a great deal of awareness now when you are at the hockey rink or the soccer field or at the rugby pitch, compared to where it was before.

"When you have athletes like Eric Lindros or even in my own community, Connor Williams from the Redblacks, and they are out there talking about the effects of their own concussions, parents take it seriously."

While the advisory committee recommended that head hits result in the offender's immediate removal from a game, the legislation does not address that.

Lindros, a committee member and former NHLer whose career was cut short by concussions, said the law is a good first step, but the pressure will be on to implement all of the advisory group's recommendations.

When he played hockey, the issue "wasn't spoken of," he said, recalling he was sent to a migraine specialist at one point in his career to deal with his symptoms, and was told he actually had suffered head trauma.

New Democrat MPP Catherine Fife (Kitchener-Waterloo), who was part of what Stringer called his "Queen's Park dream team" — along with MacLeod and Liberal MPP John Fraser (Ottawa South) — said the codes of conduct "should hold coaches and parents accountable, but also shifting that culture around the recognition that playing with a brain injury is not worth it in the end.

"It won't happen overnight, but it will happen," said Fife, whose own son suffered a concussion playing hockey.

When it comes to curbing dangerous hits, she said as Lindros has noted, the "athleticism of the game doesn't need to change, but the violence needs to change. And that's really the only way."

MacLeod said that when she used to play ringette and hockey, “there was a lot more violence on the ice than there is today, and I think people are very cognisant of the impacts of head trauma and brain injury.

“I think as a result of that, we’re starting to see that modified. I think there’s going to be a natural progression as we look at illegal hits to people’s heads and what kind of penalty does that bring,” she said.

“But ... we don’t want to start off in a punitive position — we want to start off in an awareness position.”

A number of sports leagues and school boards already have codes of conduct and concussion plans on the books. Now, they will be mandated to have such zero-tolerance policies.

MacLeod, a hockey trainer, said the injuries from head trauma can be long-lasting.

“One of the other things that I like to remind people is you cannot put a cast on your head and think that your concussion is going to go away,” she said. “... I’ve had casts on my hand. I have had knee braces. I have sprained my ankle multiple times playing soccer, and I can put a wrap on it. I can still sort of walk around. I might need some crutches but I’m going to mend ...

“Here is the thing with concussions: They might be mild, and in two weeks’ time, you may have no symptoms and you may be fine. You can have a concussion that is mild or severe, and if you don’t take care of yourself, there could be severe consequences” such as Alzheimer’s or, as in Rowan’s case, death.

The new law also sets out a Rowan’s Law Day each fall in honour of the teen.

In Canada, almost 40 per cent of youth who head to the hospital after a sports-related head injury have a concussion, and a further 24 per cent possibly having suffered one.

“We owe this to Rowan Stringer,” said Vernile. “We owe it to Rowan’s parents, Gordon and Kathleen, who over the past five years have been the strongest advocates for change in the way that we seek to prevent concussions and in helping to educate others on concussion safety.”

Vernile told the Star she had breakfast with the Stringers on Tuesday morning, and that Gordon had been asking her “are we there yet?” after five years of hard work to make change.

After the legislation passed, Vernile went over to where he and Kathleen were seated in the Legislature and said, “Gord, we are there.”