Safety! Is Your Child Truly Protected?? – Part 2

By Susan Ellis

Safety! Is Your Child Truly Protected?? – Part 1 – February 2010 generated a lot of discussion and interest in improving safety in our sport. Many people wrote to tell me it had an impact on how they thought about safety and the changes they would be making in protecting their own skaters and how club policies will change because they are more aware now. The very graphic photos shown during the Olympic Games of JR Celski sitting on the ice in a pool of blood has further heightened the need for better safety.

Many suppliers of cut resistant suits wrote to say they recognize the inadequacy of some of the materials and coverage used now and are working on new materials that are lighter and more comfortable.

One clarification I need to make as I was unaware of the rule change, is that the ISU changed their original rule on the cut resistance level in 2004 from Level 3 to Level 2 based on "the availability of worldwide resources and practical experience." Although level 3 cut resistant materials have existed for a long time, they were deemed 'uncomfortable' by the athletes and some said they would not wear them. In my opinion this is not an excuse to downgrade a safety measure. If you look at the history of safety equipment in hockey, from the helmet, to the visor, to the face mask for goalies, the trend has been that if it is introduced early in an athlete's career they WILL wear it and get used to it. You will never see a hockey player in the NHL without a helmet now, a goalie without a face mask, and players with visors are becoming the norm, even though the players all said no at first.

Part of the problem that has perhaps hampered development of better suits is that the market in skating is so small and there is no big money to be made by manufacturers. Even though the market might be small, making a minimum of level 3 cut resistance in a full body suit mandatory for all ISU competitions helps to expand the market somewhat. Further, if national associations where to carry this rule starting at a certain age or speed, it creates more opportunity for expansion, while making our athletes safer. Just what level of skater needs to be in cut level 3 or above needs some research as little kids do not impact each other at the same speed in a fall as more advanced, bigger skaters. Perhaps there needs to be different levels of cut resistance made mandatory for different levels of skaters. In my opinion though, any skater who competes who has a risk of falling hard enough to have the speed to impact themselves or another skater should have FULL body coverage, and not partial. I DO think it's pretty safe to say though that skaters who compete at World Cup, Junior World, ISU Junior A, B, and C, US and Canadian Junior Team trials, and likely even juvenile level should be in full body cut resistance level at least 3 or better. And although the market in speed skating may be small there is a much larger market in industrial safety using cut resistant clothing that perhaps could be made suitable for skating.

The Canadian Team at the Olympic Games was wearing a new suit that has full body protection made from Dyneema that has overall body protection built in – it requires no

undersuit. Perhaps had Olivier Jean been wearing this suit rather than the Kevlar he was wearing he may not have been cut. Although the suit is expensive and likely out of range for the average athlete right now, undersuits do exist in more affordable pricing. I have heard comments that even these are too expensive, and oh well, at least there is still the Kevlar option. When it comes to protecting your child, there should be no option. We are still one of the cheaper ice sports there is. Even in hockey, gear alone can run $2500-$3000 for the fancy stuff and $750-$1200 for the youngest players.

One of the more frustrating aspects of the feedback is that despite all the injuries, many do not expect the ISU or national governing bodies to change their rules any time soon. My take is simply this: If you MAKE a junior hockey player wear a helmet because it is a rule he WILL wear it because it's the rule! That's why there are so many NHL players wearing them now! It simply became the norm. In Canada, skaters are required to wear a neck guard even if they have a built-in one. This rule is there because many of the built-ins are not adequate either in terms of level of cut resistance to prevent a cut to the carotid artery, or in terms of the bib coverage SSC requires. The only time a neck guard may not be necessary is with a full coverage, high level cut resistant suit, but referees don't have the time to check every skater before a race to see if they have full coverage or to check the cut resistance level. If the full suit became the norm they would not have to check.

The Olympic Games were a prime example of what borders on negligence on the part of the international bodies (IGB) to consider the safety of the athletes above all else. The athletes themselves had expressed concern for their safety on the Vancouver luge track, yet it took a fatal accident to cause them to change the track. It took several crashes in the women's super combined ski event for officials to finally shave down a jump to make it safer. Most athletes don't get into sport expecting to have to risk their lives to be successful and the IGBs should have the responsibility of ensuring this does not happen.

This comment came from a physician: "I noticed that the cut resistance standards are based on a moving surgical blade with an applied force equivalent to a very small amount of weight – quite different than what happens from a skate, which is probably closer to chopping as opposed to slicing." This raises the question of what type of protocol should be used in testing for cut resistance for speed skating.

Another parent wrote to ask me to advise people of the dangers of allowing a skater to come back too soon after a concussion. As someone who has had multiple concussions, I can vouch for this first hand as I am still suffering post-concussion effects after many years. Concussions have been a hot topic in football and other sports including Time magazine.

A very high level long tracker skater who suffered a life threatening skull fracture two seasons ago wrote of his frustration in getting approval to wear a helmet in long track competitions. The injury was a typical long track accident where a skater falls and takes the feet out from under another skater. I find it absurd that a skater who is seeking to

protect himself would be denied wearing a helmet. I believe all skaters of all levels should have to wear helmets in long track. Ya, I can hear the groans from all the long trackers right now, but this particular long tracker can name six people in the US alone who have suffered concussions this year. Again, if this is a rule at the younger levels, skaters will grow into the rule, and pretty soon we will forget we never wore a helmet in long track, just like the short trackers have forgotten it.

A maker of suits wrote to say that the medical kit should have scissors that can cut through cut resistant materials. If a skater needs to have the suit cut off because of injury you'll want to make sure you can get through the material.

The bottom line here is that change must happen, and not just at the ISU level, but all levels of skating. I just hope it happens soon, before another athlete is seriously injured because we didn't do all we could to protect them.