

PROPOSED NHL RULE CHANGE

Deliberate Denial of a Late-Game Scoring Opportunity

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October 5, 2026

NHL/NHLPA Competition Committee
c/o Colin Campbell
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One Manhattan West
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Re: Proposed Rule Change - Deliberate Denial of an Imminent Scoring Opportunity

Dear Members of the NHL/NHLPA Competition Committee:

I am writing to suggest consideration of a relatively narrow amendment to the NHL Playing Rules addressing deliberate penalties committed in the closing seconds of a tied or one-goal game for the purpose of preventing an imminent scoring opportunity.

The issue arises because, in certain circumstances, the existing penalty may provide no meaningful remedy for the scoring opportunity that has been deliberately taken away.

Consider a simple example:

There are ten seconds remaining in a tied game. An attacking player has possession of the puck in an excellent scoring position. The goalkeeper is out of position and the attacking player has a substantially open net.

A defending player, realizing that a goal is highly probable, deliberately slashes the attacking player's hands, hooks him, trips him, or otherwise commits an obvious infraction in order to prevent the shot.

The referee properly calls a two-minute penalty. But only ten seconds remain in regulation. The practical penalty is therefore ten seconds rather than two minutes. More importantly, the defending team has deliberately exchanged ten seconds of penalty killing for the elimination of a very substantial probability of conceding the game-winning goal.

That result creates the wrong incentive.

As a matter of sporting principle, a team should not obtain an advantage by deliberately violating the rules where the ordinary penalty cannot meaningfully restore the opportunity that the violation removed.

The NHL Playing Rules already recognize this principle in several contexts. The penalty-shot provisions address circumstances in which an illegal act deprives an attacking player of a significant scoring opportunity. The awarded-goal provisions go still further in defined empty-net circumstances where an illegal act prevents what would otherwise have been a goal.

I suggest that the Rules expressly extend that remedial principle to a deliberate infraction in the closing stages of a game which prevents an obvious and imminent scoring opportunity.

Comparable principles in other sports

In association football, the Laws of the Game specifically recognize the concept of denying an obvious goal-scoring opportunity. The consequence of misconduct is influenced not simply by the technical nature of the foul but by the opportunity the foul has improperly destroyed.

The National Football League similarly recognizes that expiration of the clock should not enable a defending team to profit from a foul. Where an accepted defensive foul occurs on the final play in appropriate circumstances, the period may be extended for an untimed down. The principle is straightforward: an offending team should not be permitted to use the clock to make the remedy meaningless.

Proposed remedy

I respectfully suggest that the NHL consider adopting a similar principle. One possible rule could provide that where, in the final two minutes of regulation or at any time in overtime, a defending player deliberately commits an infraction which, in the referee's judgment, prevents an obvious and imminent scoring opportunity, the referee may impose one of the following remedies:

1. **Penalty shot.** Award a penalty shot where the infraction deprived the attacking team of a clear scoring opportunity.
2. **Awarded goal.** Award a goal where the referee determines that, but for the deliberate infraction, a goal would with virtual certainty have been scored.
3. **Extended penalty time.** Where neither remedy is appropriate, extend the game for such period as is necessary to provide the non-offending team with a meaningful power-play opportunity arising from the penalty.

I appreciate that the third alternative raises questions concerning the mechanics of extending regulation time. The Committee may therefore conclude that an expanded penalty-shot provision provides the simpler solution. My principal submission is not dependent upon the precise remedy selected.

The important principle is that the consequence of the deliberate foul should bear a reasonable relationship to the scoring opportunity that the foul eliminated.

The rule could be confined to deliberate or intentional conduct so that ordinary hockey plays do not unexpectedly produce extraordinary remedies. The referee could be directed to consider factors such as:

- the attacking player's possession and control of the puck;

- the location of the puck and player;
- the position of the goalkeeper;
- the number and position of remaining defenders;
- the likelihood that a shot would otherwise have been taken;
- whether the infraction constituted a legitimate attempt to play the puck; and
- whether the conduct was plainly intended to prevent the scoring opportunity.

Video review could also be available in the final minute of regulation and in overtime, consistent with the NHL's existing use of centralized review in critical late-game situations.

The proposed rule would address what is otherwise a potentially rational tactical foul. If a defender believes that allowing the attacking player to shoot is likely to result in defeat, while deliberately slashing or tripping that player will produce only a few seconds of penalty killing, the existing rules can inadvertently encourage the infraction.

A properly designed rule should produce the opposite incentive: play the puck legally and allow the outcome of the game to be determined by the play itself.

The NHL has repeatedly amended its Playing Rules where experience demonstrates that an unintended tactical advantage has developed from the operation of an existing rule. I suggest this is an appropriate candidate for similar consideration.

I would be pleased if the Competition Committee would consider placing the issue on the agenda for discussion at a future meeting.

Yours very truly,

David Q. Harris

References: NHL Playing Rules (penalty shots and awarded goals); NHL/NHLPA Collective Bargaining Agreement, Article 22; IFAB Laws of the Game (denying an obvious goal-scoring opportunity); NFL Rulebook (extension of a period for certain accepted defensive fouls).