Penalty infraction minutes, also known as penalties in minutes (and known to most nowadays as simply PIM), have become a significant part of fantasy hockey in recent years. As fantasy hockey has evolved, we have looked for additional measurable statistics to include beyond goals and assists. PIM was a logical choice, as it is a standard measure across all arenas (unlike hits and blocked shots), and it gave fantasy value to a much wider net of players across the NHL.

However, receiving a penalty in hockey is not something that is inherently positive (there are 'good penalties,' I suppose, but they are few and far between, and that is an entirely different argument for another column). Do you want your hockey pool to be won or lost because a player took a few more hooking or holding penalties than another player?

I have been weighing both sides of the issue in my head for a while, and decided to take it to the DobberHockey community. Should PIM be in fantasy hockey? Are there better statistics we can use if we want to reward aggressive players? I took these questions to the DobberSports Facebook page, as well as the DobberHockey forums. As expected, there were strong feelings on either side of the argument.

I gathered some interesting points raised from both sides of the argument – nothing better to resolve a debate than fleshing it out.

In favor of PIM in fantasy hockey:

Predictability – PIM are much more predicable than stats like game-winning goals, shorthanded points, hits, and blocked shots. With PIM, since they are predictable from year-to-year, there is some strategizing involved. Trying to project how many game-winning goals a player is going to get is largely luck (a good start would be figuring out who is going to get the most goals and then going from there…).

Toughness – PIM measure toughness, for the most part. Grit is an admirable quality for a hockey player. The top teams in the league have gritty players who can also score (Jarome Iginla, David Backes, Scott Hartnell, Milan Lucic, and so on). It is hard to measure grit statistically, and PIM serves this purpose for fantasy hockey.

Good PIM – A good penalty can energize an entire team, and an entire arena. There is no way to record 'quality of PIM' (for now). A lazy hooking or holding penalty shouldn't hold the same value as a sweeping poke check to break up a two-on-one, or a big hit that changes the complexion of a game.

Fantasy is supposed to be fantasy – Fantasy hockey isn't meant to mirror the on ice product. The best stats to measure on ice performance (Corsi, Fenwick, and other advanced stats) are not used in fantasy hockey (for now). There are shortcomings to all stats – blocked shots aren't always a good thing (it also means a player recording one doesn't have the puck), and plus-minus isn't the best way of measuring defensive acumen. Having statistics outside of goals and assists makes it more fun to track a wider number of players each season.

PIM shouldn't be in fantasy hockey:

Use other stats – if you want to reward the tough players, include hits and blocked shots. They are not measured consistently from arena to arena like PIM are, but (for the most part) they are both better indicators of a positive on ice play.

PIM carry too much weight – in a standard six skater category league (goals, assists, plus-minus, PIM, SOG, and PPP), PIM have too much of an impact. However, if you expand to 10 categories or more (and include a few more offensive statistics), the ability of PIM to impact the outcome of your pool is decreased.

Awarding a negative – does it make sense that a pool could be won on a hooking penalty? In football pools, penalties take away from a player's performance, they don't add to it.

Solutions:

Get creative – one reader told me about something unique his pool does. The team in the middle of the standings for PIM (for example, in their 19-team league, the 10th place team) gets the most points. This rewards the team that doesn't have too many PIM (all goons), or too few PIM (too many skill-only players). There are other ways of doing this, too.

I actually like this suggestion. Too many penalties will hurt a team, just like in real life. Too few PIM could mean the team isn't tough enough (although the Detroit Red Wings may have something to say about that). Implementation may be a bit tricky, though.

Goons – Another solution is to have PIM-only roster spots. I was in a pool with this rule once and I quite enjoyed it. You have a designated goon, who counts in all categories (goals, assists, and so on), but is the only player on your roster capable of recording PIM. Yahoo! Fantasy Hockey can't do this, unfortunately, but a few other sites can.

Majors only – Reward points for major penalties (fighting, misconducts, and so on), only. This takes away points for hooking and holding penalties (as well as any other minor penalty). This penalty doesn't really fix much (if you believe there is something that needs to be fixed in the first place), as a stupid five minute penalty is much more detrimental than a stupid two minute minor. How about counting fighting majors only?

My take:

I participate in a few leagues. Some with PIM, and some without. I think PIM has a place in leagues, provided you have a number of other statistics being recorded. In a keeper league I am in, we track 10 categories. We just started using hits, and I quite like it. Now there are limitations to recording hits, as some arena statisticians are much more generous with what constitutes a hit (Madison Square Garden, for example). With 10 categories, PIM aren't going to be a make-or-break statistic (especially with six 'offensive categories' – goals, assists, PPP, SHP, SOG, and GWG).

Do you use PIM? If so, do you have any special rules or restrictions around it?