

This Date in Safety History: March 16, 2002: The Brittanie Cecil NHL Fan Tragedy



The parents of Brittanie Cecil decided to take their daughter to a National Hockey League game for her fourteenth birthday. It was March 16, 2002, and Brittanie's favorite team, the Columbus Blue Jackets, were hosting the Calgary Flames at Nationwide Arena. The Cecils had terrific seats—rinkside, behind the goal, about 15 rows up.

About eight minutes into the second period, the Blue Jackets' talented Norwegian center, Espen Knutsen, intercepted an errant pass at the left faceoff circle and launched a slapshot. At the last moment, Calgary defenseman Derek Morris deflected the shot. The puck, traveling about 100 miles per hour, sailed over the glass and into the stands. It struck Brittanie in the left temple causing her head to snap back in a violent motion. For a while it looked like just a scare. Brittanie walked out of the arena at game's end. But the sudden movement of her head had damaged an artery in her neck. Brittanie would die two days later.

Aftermath of the Brittanie Cecil Tragedy

It was a freak accident. But the NHL learned its lesson. The League mandated a series of changes at all its arenas to

protect fans including the installation of protective nylon netting behind both goals. The black nylon nets are secured to the top of the high glass (In case you're unfamiliar with hockey rinks, the ice surface is surrounded by shatterproof glass which is at its highest point at the area behind the goals). The League also increased the height of the low glass to a minimum of five feet.

The NHL has been around for nearly 120 years. Brittanie Cecil was the first and only fan fatality in the League's history. But hers was also a preventable death. The danger of flying pucks to fans was well known. Tragically, it took the death of an eighth-grade girl to persuade the NHL to do something about it.

Equally tragic is the fact that not all of the professional sports leagues learned the lesson of Brittanie Cecil. Batted baseballs don't travel as fast as hockey pucks, but they're still potentially lethal. So, when team owners steadfastly refused to extend the safety nets behind home plate all the way down the foul lines to the outfield foul poles, a Brittanie Cecil-like incident at a Major League Baseball game was only a matter of time.

The inevitable tragedy occurred on August 25, 2018, when a 79-year-old fan named Linda Goldbloom was struck in the head by a foul ball while attending a game at Dodger Stadium. She died of traumatic head injuries four days later. After one more year of foot dragging, MLB finally mandated the installation of safety netting in all 30 of its stadiums before the opening of the 2020 season.