

MORE PRACTICE OR MORE PLAY?

Youth hockey now involves more games and tournaments than ever. Where the season used to start in October and end in March, it now goes almost non-stop for twelve months. Spring and summer seasons, which used to be dedicated to skill development programs, are now dedicated to tryouts, practices and tournaments.

Children need to have fun! They need some time away from hockey, away from the rink. They don't thrive on the constant pressure of tournaments and competition; they should play other sports and develop other athletic skills that will improve their spirit and over-all coordination.

The fact is that North America is producing inadequately skilled players, many of whom burn out before they peak!

In my opinion (and in the opinion of many hockey experts), the off-season should be used for skill development! If kids want to skate on those beautiful summer they should be doing so for skill development purposes rather than for competition!

Despite all the hockey schools and camps that have proliferated to extraordinary numbers, we are producing less skilled players. Why? Either the schools are failing to provide the skill development that they profess to provide, or fewer kids are attending the skill development programs.

An excellent series of articles, entitled "A Game in Crisis", and written by William Houston (1998), for the Toronto Globe and Mail, explored this issue. Although these articles are specific to the status of hockey in Canada, the problems with hockey in the US are almost identical. I'd like to quote from two of these articles.

"...Leading hockey figures say the game is in a crisis. Canada is a diminished force in international and professional hockey not as a result of advances made in Europe and the United States, but because the country no longer produces its own highly skilled players. Canadian youth hockey, which has a rich history of developing the game's stars, has become a wasteland for children who have been denied proper training.

Canada still sends more players to the National Hockey League than any country, but most of them are second or third-line performers -- checkers and role players, the "unskilled labour of the NHL," a former Hockey Canada head Derek Holmes calls them. The top talent, with the occasional exception, now comes from Europe."

"All the good kids, in terms of skill, are in Europe," said Paul Henry, noted scout and director of player development for the NHL's Florida Panthers. "It's just so clear cut."

Howie Meeker, a former player, coach and commentator, said: "We Canadians say, 'Hey, it's our game and we're better than everybody else.' But, in fact, every year we're slipping further and further behind."

"As recently as 12 years ago, Canadian players dominated all aspects of NHL scoring. Canadians still make up 61 per cent of the league, compared with the Europeans' 20 per cent. Yet it is European players who, for the most part, lead in offensive statistics."

"When 20 per cent of the players in the NHL are European and the best 10 per cent of the scorers are also European, that should be a wake-up call," said Ron Dussiaume, a former professional player and a master course conductor with Canada's national coaching certification program."

Glen Sather, currently the General Manager of the New York Rangers, noticed a distinct talent drop-off when he selected the 1996 World Cup team. "When we were picking defencemen, Rob Blake and Al MacInnis were hurt," Sather said. So we had to use other guys and they just didn't have the skill to play at that level."

Critics place the blame for Canada's decline at all three levels -- professional, junior and youth. Junior hockey is a business in which revenue and winning games take precedence over developing players. Professional hockey emphasizes size and aggressiveness. Minor hockey, taking its lead from the pros, does the same, placing size and strength ahead of skill and creativity, even for eight-year-olds.

While children in Europe learn fundamentals from hours of practice and are taught by trained coaches, Canadian kids are thrown into games, as many as 140 in a season. Youth hockey coaches are often inexperienced volunteers.

For parents who dream of their children becoming hockey stars, winning games is more important than learning skills and developing creativity. "They're robots," said Marty Williamson, who coaches a Tier 2 junior team in Milton, Ont. "The creativity isn't in the game and maybe the fun isn't there, either. At the age of 13, the dropout rate skyrockets."

John Neville, who has coached in minor hockey for 24 years, said: "We're not producing skilled players. We've got a system that's very broken."

Canadian players who advance to the NHL do so in spite of the system, not because of it, critics say. And even those who are good enough to play in the NHL still can't match the Europeans in skill because they weren't adequately taught as children. "We're sending players to the NHL, but we're not developing great players," said Peter Martin, the head of the Hamilton minor hockey association. "The elite players are advancing, but they would advance anyway. What about all the others?"

Neville and other coaches say minor hockey's obsession with winning is the most destructive element of the Canadian youth system. Moreover, it is one of the fundamental reasons the country is no longer producing top-level talent.

“Canadian children play in an environment that stresses winning over developing skills. Coaches, desperate for victory, use only their best players in key games. They teach defense and intimidation rather than offence and creativity. Children as young as 6 participate in twice as many games as practices. They fall well short of the 3-to-1 practice-to-game ratio recommended Hockey Canada. In the old days, Canadian children learned fundamentals on rinks and ponds away from organized hockey. But in today's game-oriented system, there is no place for unstructured activity, and the practice time children receive is inadequate.”

"If you're going to be skilled in anything, you must practice," said Ron Dussiaume, a former professional player who conducts master courses in Canada's national coaching certification program. "If your son or daughter wants to take music lessons, what you do as parents is to make sure they commit to practicing an hour a day to make it happen. We don't apply that to hockey. The lack of practice hurts us terribly."

The European system takes the other route. It places an emphasis on learning skills. While Canadians five and six years old play a 20-game schedule, children in Europe won't start playing games until they are 7. At earlier ages, they are taught to skate, pass and handle the puck.

In Canada, children 10 years old are already playing as many as 140 games in a season. In a game, even the best players handle the puck on average for about 45 seconds. In a well-structured 50-minute practice, a child will be working with the puck almost constantly.

In Europe, children play no more than 30 games and participate in more than 100 practices. They are taught by professional coaches. Skills are learned in high-tempo practices that incorporate game conditions.

"When you spend nine or 10 years as a child under those conditions, you can play like Jaromir Jagr," said Dussiaume, who has developed a minor hockey practice curriculum that incorporates European techniques.

Few, if any, Canadians play at the level of Jagr, (he helped lead the Czech Republic to a gold medal at the Nagano Olympics). Statistics show that Europeans lead the National Hockey League in most offensive categories.”

The effectiveness of European training became clear to Paul Henry, while he was watching a team practice earlier this season in Djurgarden, Sweden. "They practice twice a day," Henry said. "In the morning, they work on nothing but skills for an hour and a half. It's all skill development. When I left the arena, I realized why European kids are better than our kids.”

Perhaps it would be wise for parents and aspiring hockey players to evaluate their long-term goals before deciding the best way to dedicate their “hockey time” this coming summer.

***SKATE GREAT HOCKEY,
LAURA STAMM***

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