



# ARTICLE OF THE MONTH

## DECEMBER

### The Open Ice Summit

(Toronto August 26 – 27, 1999)

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Over the past few years, many of hockey's brightest minds have seen the influence of North American players on a slow decline. The facts are undeniable. In the NHL Awards the Hart Trophy ( MVP ) saw the 3 finalists were Europeans. The Norris (Defensemen ) and Vezina ( Goal ) had 1 European in each of the final 3, with Hasek winning the Vezina.

The Calder Trophy (Rookie) had 2 European finalists. The winner might as well have been a European, Chris Drury, because Chris did not play hockey 12 months a year. Chris did not even begin to concentrate on hockey until he was about 16 years old. Baseball was the sport that he excelled in. Chris also played what was basically public high school hockey in Connecticut. He fostered his great passion for all sports by playing what was in season, not burning out or over-training, just as the Europeans do.

The Lady Byng (Gentlemanly Player) and Selke (Defensive Forward) both had 2 Europeans finalists with Jere Lehtinen winning the Selke, which up until recently was considered a North American strength.

Twelve of the top 25 scorers in the NHL were Europeans. The numbers might seem to indicate that it is a 50/50 split, however this is a huge change from 6 or 10 years ago. A closer look finds that 11 of the Europeans 12 top scorers were born in or after 1970. The North Americans had 6 players born before 1970 and 8 born in or after 1970.

If you change the year of birth to 1971 the North Americans only have 4 of the top 25 scorers in the NHL, the Europeans still have 10. The trend is clear, most of the talented young players are coming from Europe. So, 10 of the top 14 scorers in the NHL under the age of 29 are from Europe.

An even closer look finds players such as Paul Kariya, John LeClair and Keith Tkachuk, who were in the NHL top 25 scorers 1998 – 99, did not take what could be referred to as "traditional routes" to the NHL. None played Canadian Major Junior Hockey. Paul Kariya, a Canadian, played Tier II hockey and then on to the University of Maine. " Paul played all sports as a child...He played lacrosse, tennis, soccer and basketball...' At one time I dreamed about playing in the NBA', Paul comments," writes Jeff Savage author of Paul Kariya: Hockey Magician.

" Where I lived in Vancouver, we didn't get ice times all that much, so I'd watch tapes and think about what I was going to do." Kariya as with most of the

players on the top 25 scorers list did not play hockey twelve months a year. His best hockey was ahead of him at 15 years of age or so and not behind him. Like all great players he has a passion for the sport and for excelling. He did not have it taken out of him running around all summer to tournaments, just as the Europeans take time off and play other sports.

John LeClair also did not take the “traditional route” to the NHL growing up in a small Vermont town. John like Chris Drury played other sports , he did not play hockey twelve months a year and he played in a town high school hockey league. Even while attending the University of Vermont John did not see himself as an NHL player much less a star.

As for Tkacuk, he hardly played his final two years of high school hockey breaking a leg in his junior and senior year. Obviously this did not hurt his development in any way.

Even U.S. Colleges have recruited more Europeans. The 1999 NCAA Champion Maine Black Bears skated 5 Europeans. Boston University the 1999 Beanpot Champion had two Europeans.

While at the Dallas Stars training camp, I asked our European scout, Jiri Hrdina, a 3 time Stanley Cup winner, about Czech youth hockey. Hrdina answered that, their players do not skate in May, June or July, but that they play other sports. Hrdina said, “it is **too much skating.**” Hrdina went on to say, “ in Czech Republic the coaches are professionals. How can you come out of a business and coach? You don’t know what to do.”

Before attending the Stars training camp I was in Sweden. Youth teams were just starting up in August after being off of the ice for three months. Every practice was filled with skill work and lots of shinny hockey.

On one end of the ice one coach ran half his players through different skill drills. At the other end of the ice another coach watched as the players not involved in the skill drills played cross-ice shinny games. Players rotated through each end of the ice throughout the hour.

Contrast this to watching a youth practice in North America with 8 year olds this past September.

The first 6 or 7 minutes the coach was talking in center ice, then the next 6 or 7 minutes they did stretching, laying on the cold ice! Firstly, you don’t waste ice time by stretching, you do that off of the ice and secondly you do not stretch a cold muscle, you warm-up, then stretch. Thirdly, you must be very careful with young players. When they have a growth spurt, the bone grows before the muscle. Therefore the muscle can already be stretched and damage could occur.

Which players will develop a passion for the game? The ones who are laying on the cold ice playing 12 months a year or the ones who are coming back after 3 months of another sport? Which players will develop skills the ones being lectured or the ones playing shinny hockey? Which players are having fun and fostering a passion for the game?

The recommendations of the Summit can be found in various hockey web sites or Canadian newspapers from late August and early September. Some of the recommendations were:

- • Create a system of mentor/master coaches.
- • The practice to game ratio should favor practices to games.
- • Raise awareness of skill development.
- • Be careful of rushing players to play “up” to the next level too soon.

Below are some comments from participants from the Hockey News 9/10/99 & 9/17/99:

- • “ The opportunity to develop skill is limitless. Passion and physical play have limits...**We can do better and not cheat players by giving them that skill base.**” George Kingston former San Jose Sharks coach now Assistant with the Thrashers
- • “ We put so much emphasis on kids staying back if they’re on defense, or staying on the wing if they’re a winger. Maybe we can change the system so kids are a little more creative. **We need to make a lot of changes.**” **Wayne Gretzky**
- • “ I don’t know that the system ( North American) is set up to develop another Wayne Gretzky. There was less structure when he came up. Kids are playing 100 games a year!” Former NHL Calder winner Steve Larmer.
- • “There is nothing worse than going to a pee-wee practice and seeing a coach teach the trap.” Peter deBoer Plymouth Whalers coach.
- • “ **You have to tell parents their child is not getting the chance to improve by playing all those games.** It might take some time and some convincing, but I think it has to be done.” Murray Costello former CHA president.

Below from The Toronto Sun 8/27/99:

- • “We have to slow the machine down. We have to allow our players to develop at the appropriate rate. We in Canada seem consumed by wanting to rush our players... The question I ask is: do you want quantity or quality?...What’s the big rush?”  
John Gardner president of the Greater Toronto Hockey League
- • “ The other day Trevor Linden was asked when he first thought he was an NHL prospect. He said he was 16 years old. ‘ I never thought about it before that’.”  
Above from the article Hockey Highway is too Fast ,by Steve Simmons
- • “**One of the reasons I think the Europeans are so successful is because they play soccer in the summer. It gives them a break.** But in Canada ( North America) there are a lot of kids playing twelve months a year. By the time they’re in their teens they’ve reached the burnout stage. They’re sick of it.”  
Above from the article Ease up Parents , by Dave Fuller

Below from Toronto ( CP ) 8/24/99

- • “parents want the games. We must change some attitudes here and put people in position to be willing to accept change. **I’m involved in minor hockey and the biggest issue you have is parents wanting to play, play, play.**”  
Dave Branch the commissioner of the CHL

Below from The Globe and Mail 9/4/99

- • “...**Our system of teaching hockey to kids is out of whack, distorted by values that, at worst, make it impossible to develop skilled players**...For years the Canadian Hockey Association has promoted the idea of dryland training for kids, because proficiency in off-ice sporting activities makes a child into a better all-round athlete, and helps a hockey player become a great player...In Europe dryland training has been a critical part of the hockey development systems for decades.”

From the article Open Ice points the way, but will Grassroots Follow? By William Houston

Mr. Houston goes on to write, “The folly of the Canadian ( North American ) games oriented hockey system, in which practice is an afterthought.” In an analogy by the chair of kinesiology ( the principle of human mechanical movement ) at McMaster University, Huston writes of the absurdity of expecting a concert violinist becoming accomplished by having “ 100 concerts in a year and practice one hour a week. Yet, this is precisely what we ask of young hockey players.” **Houston goes on to conclude that today’s young hockey players are being cheated out of the chance to reach their potential.**

Below from Canadian Press 8/25/99

- • “...Gretzky once again voiced his main concern in Canadian ( North American ) minor hockey, developing individual skills... he said, ‘Guys like Bobby Orr and Jean Belliveau would go out and play on frozen ponds and rivers and learn to be creative and a little imaginative handling the puck’, Gretzky said. ‘ We’re a little more structured today. Kids are already learning systems at the age of eight, nine and ten.’ Gretzky goes on to say, **I truly believe the ones who aren’t pressured at the age of 13,14,15 they’re the ones who succeed, and the ones who stay in it longer.**”

Below from Toronto Sun 8/28/99

- • “ Ken Dryden said **when star players are pushed into older leagues at too young an age they are forced to depend on their survival skills and sometimes become career survivors instead of realizing their potential.**”

Below from (CP ) 9/8/99

- • “ They’re teaching kids to play the wrong way, “ said Mike Bossy, the former NY Islanders sniper, “ It’s become too complicated. They’re teaching kids...systems...How can you let them develop creativity and individuality like that?”

In the 1999 NHL Draft, the top 4 players were Europeans and 17 of the top 28 players selected ( the 1<sup>st</sup> round ) were Europeans. The 2000 Draft by all accounts should again follow this path.

One can argue that such facts are just “cyclical” and they may or may not be right. The point is, if this is not just “cyclical”, then many young players are being short-changed in their development. It comes down to receiving and acting upon information that increases the chances of ones reaching their individual potential or making a wild guess at how one pursues excellence.

**Ken Dryden notes from his video Home Game:**

“ (Youth hockey) is a little boys game played to:

- • adult coaches
- • adult fans
- • and adult expectations”

Dryden goes on to say, “ but who becomes a star? Richard, Howe, Hull, Beliveau, Mahvolich, Orr, LaFleur, Gretezky and Lemieux; all the greatest modern players players, without exception are from working class families. All but Lemieux and Richard are from small towns. The reason is time.”

“ In a small town there are fewer distractions, there are fewer things to do. In working class families there are fewer choices.” Dryden goes on to say that Dave Taylor’s ( long time King, now the GM ) was a miner. Wayne Gretzky’s father worked as a telephone technician.

**“ Whether in music, law, literature, or business. Time.**

**Unorganized time, alone is the incubator for creativity and greatness.”**

Quoting the educator Nothrup Frye Dryden says,

**“ The purpose of the school system is to instill a love of Learning.**

**For if you love something you will spend time with it,**

**Willingly, happily, until it almost becomes a part of you.”**

*Remember; the people quoted in the above article are professionals with years and years of experience in the game. They are not other parents or know-it-alls, who seem to have become prime information disseminators in our sport.*

**TIP OF THE MONTH:**

The soccer star Pele wrote in an article in Sports Illustrated ( 3/25/91).

“ Many coaches fearful of losing their high-paying jobs no longer play to win, they play not to lose. That subtle shift in attitude has had far-reaching effects at all levels of the sport, from the mechanized way kids learn the game to the questionable defensive tactics pros use to frustrate their rivals.”

“To create a goal is a complex task that requires dozens of split-second decisions and imagination to anticipate 3, 4 or 5 moves ahead. Most of today’s players, who are products of the over-emphasis on defense ( systems in hockey ) aren’t afforded the opportunities to master these skills.”

**“ What has been lost in the process is the very heart and soul of the game.”**

**QUOTE OF THE MONTH:**

**“We need to make a lot of changes.” Wayne Gretzky**

**DRILL OF THE MONTH:**

**Below is excerpted from the article of the month.**

Before attending the Stars training camp I was in Sweden. Youth teams were just starting up in August after being off of the ice for three months. Every practice was filled with skill work and lots of shinny hockey.

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Almost every NHL player interviewed about the Summit mentioned the importance of non-structured shinny hockey.