



GAME IN CRISIS

PART I

A Game in Crisis

A twelve part series by **William Houston** of the **Toronto Globe and Mail** on the state **Canadian** hockey following the traumatic loss in the 1998 Winter Olympics.

We bring this to you for several reasons: **1.** References in the articles to Canada in most case will also apply to USA and therefore should be thought of perhaps as a North American issue. **2.** Two years later the stated issues still exist and apply to many of our current hockey programs. **3.** We (parents, players, coaches, and administrators) must have a global understanding of the state of our sport if we to address the issues to progress in the next millennium for the benefit of our participants and the sport of hockey. We hope you find this series informative.

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First of 12 parts.

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By William Houston

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THE images linger: **Paul Henderson**, at the goalmouth, slapping in his rebound; **Mike Bossy** deflecting a shot by **Paul Coffey**; **Mario Lemieux** bearing in, shooting, scoring. At the highest level of international competition, **Canada** affirmed what we already knew: Our country produced the best hockey players in the world.

But circumstances have changed and so has **Canada's** place in the game. The country that invented hockey no longer dominates the sport. The swagger disappeared after **Canada** lost three of four games to the **United States** in the **1996 World Cup of Hockey**. Now, more questions are being asked after the Canadian men's fourth-place finish in the **Nagano Olympics**.

Though some cling to the memories of **Canada's** former glories, 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," as former Hockey Canada head Derek Holmes calls them. The top talent, with the occasional exception, now comes from countries other than Canada.

"All the good kids, in terms of skill, are in Europe," said Paul Henry, the 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."

Bruce Hood, a former NHL referee, says the notion that Canada is still No. 1 is based on nostalgia rather than reality.

"We've always had this pompous, arrogant attitude that it's our game and we're the best," he said. "But how many times are we going to get beaten [before] people understand we're not?"

Although some attribute Canada's international losses to the bad luck of facing two hot goaltenders, **Mike Richter** in 1996 and **Dominik Hasek** at **Nagano**, the performance of opposing goalies doesn't explain Canada's weak showing in both tournaments. In 1996, the team struggled to defeat Germany and was fortunate to get past **Sweden**. At **Nagano, Canada** was outplayed in the two big games that counted by smaller hockey countries, the **Czech Republic** and **Finland**.

"There are people, who say that if Eric Lindros [didn't] hit the post [in the shootout against Hasek] or if somebody else [scored], we would have won," said former player Billy Harris, who has coached professionally in North America and Europe. "They're just rationalizing."

Moreover, the argument that Canada's decline is attributable to the growth of the game in Europe is less compelling than statistics that show 3.5 times as many children playing hockey in Canada's development system as children in the development systems of Sweden, Finland, Russia, the Czech Republic and Slovakia combined.

As recently as 10 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.

This season, Europeans hold down the first three spots and four of the top five in NHL scoring. In goal scoring, Canadians are shut out of the top six spots and place only three in the first 10. The leading scorer among defencemen is a European.

A look at NHL all-star teams over the past 10 years shows a steady decline in Canadian content. In 1987-88, Canadians made up 83 per cent (five of six spots) of the first all-star team. Europeans composed 17 per cent (one spot).

But five years ago, Canada's percentage dropped to 66 per cent (four players), while a European and a U.S. player filled the two remaining positions. Three years ago, Canadians were down to 33 per cent. Europeans and Americans were also at 33 per cent. And then last year, Europeans made up 66 per cent, while Canadian content had shrunk to 33 per cent. The projected composition of this year's all-star team has Europeans at 66 per cent and 17 per cent each for Canada and the United States.

"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.

Hall of Famer Bobby Hull says Canadian hockey has ignored signs of decline for years.

"Do they have to be hit right between the eyes before they realize what's doing on?" Hull asked. "It's unforgivable what's happened to our game. We've gone so far backward we think down is up."

Hull and another Hall of Famer, Mike Bossy, both veterans of international hockey, watched the Nagano tournament and thought the Canadian team lacked talent. Hull said he was disheartened by the Canadian team's inability to carry the play to the opposition, a style that had been a Canadian trademark.

"I love the game," Hull said, "and I just feel bad that it has gotten to the point where you watch a Canadian team play in one of the greatest tournaments, and they were afraid to carry the puck. I'd never seen a Canadian team that was afraid to take the play to the opposition."

Said Bossy: "Obviously, nothing against the players who were there. I mean, they played their heart out and weren't able to win. But I think as far as individual talent, it left a little to be desired."

Edmonton Oilers president and general manager Glen Sather says he noticed a talent dropoff 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, and rarely practice. They are coached by volunteers, many of whom are inexperienced or incompetent.

For parents who dream of their sons becoming NHL stars, winning and playing games are more important than children learning skills and having fun. Instead of scoring goals, children are instructed to play defensively and to intimidate. At the age of 13, the dropout rate skyrockets.

"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."

John Neville, who has coached in minor hockey for 24 years, said: "We're not producing skilled players. It's an absolute reality. 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 players," said Peter Martin, the head of the Hamilton minor hockey association. "The elite players are the ones advancing, but they would advance anyway."

Rick Polutnik, an executive with Alberta's amateur body, describes youth hockey in Canada as disorganized and leaderless.

"I would suggest most minor-hockey associations don't know what they're doing," he said. "Then I would suggest that if you interviewed every board member of every minor-hockey association in Canada and every provincial body, and you interviewed every board member of the national body, you would not get a clear consensus as to what we're doing with the game of hockey."

General managers of Canadian-based NHL teams say what's clear to them is a Canadian talent shortage.

"I think there is a problem," said Ken Dryden, president and general manager of the Toronto Maple Leafs. "Why is it that the European players are tending toward the top of the scoring list and on the all-star teams? The evidence would suggest that we're not doing as well in some ways as we need to do."

Sather says there's too much emphasis on winning and not enough time spent on teaching fundamentals.

"A lot of minor-hockey coaches think they're running NHL teams," he said. "They go with two or three lines and kids are left out."

"Minor hockey should be about development. That's exactly what they do in Europe. They practice and they work on skills."

Pierre Gauthier, general manager of the Ottawa Senators, said: "We need to get more kids on the ice. We need to change that mentality where you go to an atom game [11-year-olds] and the best players are always on the ice, and it's all about winning. It's totally ridiculous."

Réjean Houle, general manager of the Montreal Canadiens, says that stressing defensive tactics for eight-year-old children robs them of their creativity.

"You inhibit the imagination and artistry of the person," he said. "Let them experience emotion and spontaneity."

Although there is agreement that changes are needed in minor and junior hockey for Canada to get back on top, there is also skepticism about anything substantial being done.

"Nothing will happen," Meeker predicted. "This will pass over. You'll write an article, someone else will write an article, but it will not make one bit of difference to how minor hockey is run in this country, and it just breaks my heart."

Harris says Canadians will again experience the pride and thrill of their team winning a major international tournament, but it won't happen often.

"I don't think we will ever dominate hockey again," he said. "We will win a world championship once in a while, but we'll need a hot goalie and some lucky goals to do it."

Canadians will forever remember the achievements of Henderson, Bossy and Lemieux, but the memories might also divert attention from the reality of our failing game. The players who brought glory to Canada were products of another system, one in which children played more freely and practiced more frequently. The greatest obstacle to reform in Canadian hockey is the claim that nothing needs to be changed.