



GAME IN CRISIS

PART II

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.

Skills Development

Europe is beating us, stressing practice for youngsters.

Win at all costs hurts children

Monday, April 6, 1998

By William Houston

Sports Reporter

THE request appalled John Neville, but it did not surprise him. After his team was eliminated from the playoffs a few weeks ago, he was approached by the president of the winning Toronto Marlboro peewee club. The Marlboro president asked Neville to release the star goaltender of his team in Markham to the Marlies for the duration of the playoffs. "He told me it was a great opportunity for my player," said Neville, who has been coaching in minor hockey for 24 years. "I looked at him and said, 'What about the opportunity for the goaltender you've got -- the one who gets to sit on the bench while my guy takes you to the promised land?' "

The next day, Markham goalie Matt George turned down the offer, saying he did not want to be responsible for the Marlie goalie being removed from the lineup.

Marlboro officials had no such concern about the humiliation and betrayal of a youngster who came out to games and practices during the season and had been loyal to the team.

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 defence and intimidation rather than offence and creativity. Instead of learning the game, the focus is on playing.

In Canada, children as young as 6 participate in twice as many games as practices.

Coached by volunteers, many of whom are inexperienced, they fall well short of the 3-to-1 practice-to-game ratio recommended by Canada's amateur body, Canadian Hockey.

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 make sure they are agreeable to practicing an hour a day to make it happen. "We don't apply that to hockey. So the lack of practice hurts us tremendously."

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, who 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, the director of player development for the NHL's Florida Panthers, 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 Canadian kids."

Inadequate practice time is only one of the problems caused by Canadians' consuming need to play games and win. Instead of being taught offensive skills, eight-year-old children are instructed on defensive systems. They are discouraged from handling the puck or attempting offensive plays. A team is more likely to win if it plays safe, conservative hockey.

Lee Fogolin, a former NHL defenceman and now a minor hockey coach in Edmonton, said: "We wonder why our defencemen aren't mobile and can't handle the puck. Well, go to the rink and watch. The coaches are yelling, 'Get it out! Dump it in! Don't handle the puck!' The kids get the puck and as soon as it's on their stick, it's gone."

Toronto lawyer William McMurtry, whose 1974 report on violence in amateur hockey predicted that Canada would fall behind Europe in developing skilled players, remembers his son Tom playing minor hockey as a 12-year-old.

Although a good player at an elite level, Tom asked to move the next year to less competitive house-league hockey. The fact that he was clearly superior to his teammates in house league prompted McMurtry to ask him whether he missed playing at the higher level.

"He thought for the longest time," McMurtry recalled. "And then he said, 'No Dad. Sometimes I feel like skating in front of my own net with the puck.'"

At the elite level, even 12-year-olds weren't allowed to skate in front of their own net. Canadians' obsession with hockey, once a stimulant that drove Canada to be a world leader, has given way to the pursuit of winning at all costs. It isn't children who insist on playing games and winning. It is, instead, the parent who dreams of seeing his son in the NHL. It is the coach who thinks he has a future in pro hockey. And it is the volunteer-

association official who covets the bragging rights that go with being the head of a winning organization.

"It's all ego," McMurtry said. "Parents, coaches, organizers can call it anything they want, but it's ego.

"If they really cared about the standard of hockey in this country and they really cared about the kids, they wouldn't be doing it this way."

Ray Lalonde, who played university hockey in the United States and coaches in the Metropolitan Toronto Hockey League, said: "I sometimes think we should put pucks on the ice, leave a couple of parents to supervise and the rest of us go in and drink coffee.

"The kids would love it. They don't really care about winning and losing. You can ask the little ones and half can't remember whether they won or lost. But the parents remember.

"It's the parents who need the games. They say, 'Oh, I just find hockey so exciting.' Well, it's not really entertainment for the parents. It's supposed to be fun for the kids."

It's hard to imagine that there's much fun left in a system that summarily cuts or benches a 13-year-old.

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Clarification

It was reported Monday that the Toronto Marlboro peewee team sought to replace its regular goaltender with a goalie from outside the organization. The Marlboros did recruit a second goaltender for the Ontario playoffs. Although the goaltending duties were shared by the two goalies, the Marlies' own goaltender played in the key games.

(Wednesday, April 8, 1998,)