



# GAME IN CRISIS

## PART IV

### 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.

Size beating out skill, even early on  
BODY CONTACT / Smaller kids, even the ones showing  
promise and talent, aren't sticking around.

With intimidation and trench warfare, the minor hockey  
system is weeding out all but the biggest players.

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By William Houston

Sports Reporter

THE boy at tryout camp showed promise. He was a better skater and puck handler than many of the prospects. And when he was cut, the coach conceded he was one of the team's more talented players.

"But this year," the coach said, "we're really looking for more size."

The boy was eight years old.

The story, told by Toronto lawyer William McMurtry about a friend's child, helps explain why kids quit hockey and why Canada is falling behind other countries in producing the best players in the world.

Hockey at the minor and junior levels in Canada reflects play in the National Hockey League. Because the NHL values size, so too does youth hockey. In the NHL, players need to be large and strong enough to break through the obstructionism. Minor hockey also places a priority on big players.

The result, according to Hall of Famer Bobby Hull and other critics of the system, is a diminished skill level in the youth game. Small players with talent don't get picked for teams, and even if they do, they ride the bench. Those who do get ice time are larger and more aggressive.

The product of this exclusionary system is what Hull calls, with a mixture of disdain and humour, the kukaloo -- a lumbering NHL player who is tough and hard-working but doesn't skate very well, has a low skill level and is hopelessly outclassed in the arena of elite international hockey.

"You watch those kukaloos on the ice in the NHL," Hull said. "They can't pass. Sure, they can shoot and skate, but only if they're given half a day to do it."

Unfortunately, Hull said, Canadian hockey produces mostly kukaloos these days. The top talent in the NHL now comes from Europe.

Nada Stajan, a parent in Mississauga, has seen her son, Matthew, cope in a system that places a premium on size. Matthew Stajan is skilled but small compared with other players in his league. Moreover, his birthday is in December, which means he is almost a year younger than peers with January and February birthdays.

"When he was cut from a team in peewee, he wanted to quit hockey, he was so upset," Stajan said. "We had to scramble to find him a team."

John Neville, a minor-hockey coach who also scouts for the Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds of the Ontario Hockey League, said the late bloomers are written off in the Canadian system. "We're eliminating them because of the perception they can't survive or they don't bring to the table the things we need," he said. "And we're missing the boat."

Hull observed that, almost to a man, the finest hockey players Canada has produced have been 6 feet or less and under 200 pounds. They include Hull, Wayne Gretzky, Bobby Orr, Maurice Richard and Guy Lafleur. Gordie Howe was six feet and 200 pounds.

"We're bullying players of that size and skill out of the game," Hull said. "Why should they bother staying in? They'll have more fun taking up skiing and playing tennis. We've lost a generation of potentially great players."

At all levels of hockey, size is inexorably tied to intimidation. Hockey is a contact sport, so there is nothing wrong about playing physically. But in Ontario, parents are objecting to the provincial hockey federation's plans to introduce bodychecking for eight-year-olds, lowering the age level from 12.

"Bodychecking spells one word, intimidation, and everything that goes with that word," said Ron Tereshyn, who played minor hockey in Toronto and whose 10-year-old son is in the Scarborough association. "The whole idea is for kids to have fun."

The Ontario Hockey Federation defends its move by saying kids at the ages of 12 and 13 are suffering injuries from bodychecking. Better to teach them at an early age how to handle contact.

But Michael Clarfield, a sports-medicine physician and team doctor for the Toronto Maple Leafs, said the bodychecking issue obscures the real problem in minor hockey -- children are not being taught how to skate, stickhandle and pass.

"You put bodychecking into a game and injuries go up," he said. "That's a fact at any age. Nobody can refute that. The issue of bodychecking isn't the real problem. From what I'm seeing, we're not developing skills."

Some parents do favour contact for children starting at eight years old. When the head of a hockey association in Ontario heard that the OHF was lowering the age for bodychecking, he was delighted. It would mean, he told a friend, that his 10-year-old son, who lacks talent but not size, would play at a higher level, because he would be able to "instill fear" in his opponents.

The element of fear may work for an unskilled player trying to impress a coach, but it inhibits smaller children with ability from developing.

Generally, an eight-year-old in contact hockey won't handle the puck as much as he should in a game or take chances that will put him jeopardy, but would otherwise improve his skills.

"I remember the year our son's team went from non-contact to contact," Leaf president and general manager Ken Dryden said. "There was just this absolute fixation on bodychecking.

"Once it becomes a fixation, then everything you do becomes a compromise. Your skating becomes a compromise, your stickhandling, your passing, your shooting.

"Bodychecking might improve psychological skills, make you mentally stronger, more competitive, the rest of it. But if you're not playing a style that encourages skills to get better, all you're going to do is improve in skills that aren't necessarily the ones you want to be better at."

Tereshyn said he will keep his child out of contact hockey next season. Bodychecking will come later, but the unanswered question for him is: Will his son meet the required size to get a fair chance in Canadian hockey?

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.