



# GAME IN CRISIS

## PART IX

### 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.

Part 9 of 12

Europeans make serious practice of development

SKILL LEVELS / Canada's approach of rushing its youth into game conditions may hurt in the long run.

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By William Houston

Sports Reporter

PAT Stapleton, who played for Canada in the 1972 Summit Series and now teaches hockey to children, surveyed the landscape of Canadian hockey and said, "I've never seen a country with so many arenas produce so few good players."

Stapleton was counting the 3,000-plus arenas that are used for hockey in Canada compared with 1,000 in all of Europe. He was also observing that there are 3.5 times as many children playing in this country's development system as in Sweden, Finland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Russia combined.

Despite these resources, Canada has declined in the development of top players. Today, Europeans lead in most National Hockey League scoring statistics.

At the Nagano Olympics, the Czech Republic, which has one-19th of Canada's numbers in youth hockey participation, won the gold medal. Finland, with one-12th Canada's numbers, knocked off this country in the bronze-medal game.

Anders Hedberg, a Swede and assistant general manager of the Toronto Maple Leafs, suggested in a radio interview last year that if Canada, which has 475,000 children playing youth hockey, used the European system of developing players, it would win international games 10-0.

Hedberg was perhaps overstating his case, but the question remains: What is Europe doing that Canada is not?

For starters, European countries take their time teaching players. In Canada, it's a rush. Canadian children as young as five are thrown into a schedule of 20 games a season. In Europe, children don't play until they are at least seven. From the age of five to seven, they are taught skating and hockey skills in training schools twice a week.

The practice-to-game ratio is consistently higher in Europe than in Canada's game-oriented system. A Canadian eight-year-old may practice once for every two games played. In Europe, the ratio is turned around, so a child gets three practices to every game.

For the most part, European countries use professional coaches to teach children. Canada has a volunteer system that yields good, but too often bad results behind the bench.

At the age of eight, Canadian children are funnelled into a tiering system that grades them and places some in elite divisions. This sends out the message to most children, particularly the late bloomers, that they are not good enough. They may quit. Tiering doesn't begin in most European countries until children are at least 10.

An 11-year-old child will play 30 games in a season in Europe and participate in at least three times as many practices. In the high-octane environment of elite minor hockey in Canada, an 11-year-old might play 140 games in leagues and tournaments. Canada's system does produce, for the most part, the best goaltenders in the world because they face shots that count in so many games.

A top-level player in Canada participates in hockey 12 months of the year. During the summer months, he will play in weekend tournaments and during the week he will be taking power-skating classes.

Critics say this approach burns out players or makes them into one-dimensional athletes. The way to develop a great athlete is to have him participate in more than one sport as a youth.

In Europe, children are in a hockey program 11 months of the year, but the four-month off-season is used for dryland training. Soccer complements hockey and develops a child's agility, balance and footwork. Both Mats Sundin and Peter Forsberg, the two best Swedish forwards in the NHL, were both excellent soccer players and, in fact, met for the first time as children at a soccer tournament.

Russia, and to a lesser extent the Czech Republic and Slovakia, uses the old Eastern European hot-housing system of developing players. Top athletes are identified at age seven and placed in sports schools, where they receive professional training in a high practice-to-game ratio. This intense streaming process has produced some of the most skilled athletes to have played the game.

Still, the Russian system and other European training programs aren't without problems. There is no mass participation in Russian hockey. Potentially great hockey players, specifically slow developers, are never given a chance to play in this exclusionary setup.

In Sweden, hockey officials are concerned about the phlegmatic nature of their junior players. They lack competitiveness and determination, two qualities that have made Canadian players winners.

Still, the European, by the time he reaches the NHL, is enormously talented, and after a period adjustment, the competitive instincts flow.

The United States has based its player development on Canada's system, with a few significant differences. U.S. hockey is game-oriented, and, as in Canada, children play too many games and do not practice enough. But U.S. hockey differs from the Canadian game in that it is often part of a school's athletic program. Players in a high school and a college system get more practice time than counterparts in junior hockey.

In addition, U.S. hockey is played, in some regions, on Olympic-sized ice, at the youth, junior and college levels. The larger surface requires a skater to be faster and more mobile, and it provides the time and space needed for a player to use stick skills in games.

Despite its humiliating sixth-place finish at Nagano, the United States has the resources to emerge as the dominant hockey country in the world. USA Hockey is well financed, partly by the NHL, and has the fastest-growing youth system in the world. When USA Hockey's annual budget of \$20-million (U.S.) is converted into Canadian funds, it is almost three times that of Canadian Hockey's \$10-million budget. At its current rate of growth, U.S. youth participation in hockey will surpass Canada's in four years.

Still, Canada's advantage over all countries is its passion for the game. If the required changes were made in Canada's development system, Hedberg's estimation of its potential may not be far off.