



GAME IN CRISIS

PART V

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 5 of 12

Hockey establishment not keen to learn from setbacks

ICE FOLLY / Despite much evidence that the system isn't working, Canadian hockey resists innovation.

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By William Houston

Sports Reporter

HOWIE Meeker watched Canada's fourth-place finish in the Nagano Olympic hockey tournament with his two sons, Howie Jr. and Mike.

After the Canadians lost the bronze-medal game to Finland, a country that has one-sixth the population of Canada and one-12th the number of children playing development hockey, Howie Jr., turned to his father and asked, "Do you think we'll learn anything from this?"

"Before I could answer," recalled Meeker, a former player, coach and commentator, "Howie Jr. said, 'Nah, not a snowball's chance.' "

Critics are skeptical about Canadian hockey's willingness to change an outdated development system that no longer produces the best hockey players in the world.

Hockey in this country has a tradition of resisting change and viewing new ideas suspiciously, especially when they come from outside the establishment.

Bruce Hood, a former NHL referee, called it "an arrogant attitude that says it's our game, we're the best, and how dare you tell us what to do."

Canadian hockey's hostility to new ideas can be traced back to at least the 1940s, when a young fitness guru in Toronto, Lloyd Percival, developed conditioning and training regimens, and published them in a book titled *How To Train For Hockey* and later in a second book, *The Hockey Handbook*.

The NHL disdainfully rejected Percival's theories, except for one team, the Detroit Red Wings. The Wings didn't win four Stanley Cups between 1950 and 1955 solely because of his training techniques, but Gordie Howe said it did help the players, particularly him. "I was into a lot of his stuff, running and aerobics," he said. "He was so far ahead of his time they all thought he was a little wacko."

The Toronto Maple Leafs were particularly scornful. The two sides feuded, and Percival was moved to say at one point, "NHL players are the most primitively trained of all major athletes."

But sports organizations outside hockey listened to Percival. Bud Wilkinson, the legendary coach of U.S. college football's Oklahoma Sooners, implemented his systems. So did several National Football League teams, as well as track and field coaches.

In hockey, the Percival method was embraced by Sweden, Czechoslovakia and, most important to the future of the international game, the Soviet Union. His book became the foundation of Anatoly Tarasov's Soviet system. Percival stressed conditioning and proper diet. He taught balance, agility and lateral movement, the very qualities for which Russian players would become renowned.

By 1964, the Soviet Union was clearly the dominant power in international hockey. At the time, Percival said: "Today, Russian hockey players are skating an average of four miles an hour faster than NHL players and keeping up the faster pace twice as long or more. The Russian players are not only in far better shape than NHL players, but they are better coached in theory and technique of the game."

For most people, the idea that Russian players were superior to Canada's best professionals was ludicrous. Before the 1972 Summit Series, it was predicted by almost everyone that Canada would easily win every game.

Members of Canada's national team, amateurs who had consistently lost to the Soviet powerhouse during the 1960s, weren't so sure. All along, they had argued the Russians were better hockey players than Canadians believed.

Some national team members attended the first game of the 1972 series at the Montreal Forum. As the Soviet Union took control of the game, Derek Holmes, who played for Canada in the 1960s, said he and his teammates "quietly gloated."

"We were sitting near the bench," Holmes recalled. "I remember the Russian Valery Vasiliev, as he was leaving the ice, winked at me and nodded, as if it were an affirmation. The Canadian players' mouths were open and they were gasping for air."

The 1972 experience, according to popular Canadian mythology, opened the eyes of the hockey establishment to the innovations of European hockey.

In the years that followed, the NHL did pay more attention to physical conditioning. And as Europeans joined North American teams, lane changing and free-flowing offence increased. Some teams, such as the Edmonton Oilers, used European practice drills. But in the development of players, nothing changed.

"They didn't learn anything from 1972," Hall of Famer Bobby Hull said. "If they had learned anything, they would have gone back to teaching the basic fundamentals of our game."

But there was no motivation to change. After 1972, Canada held its own in the big international tournaments. It defeated Czechoslovakia in the 1976 Canada Cup. Although it lost the 1979 Challenge Cup two games to one to the Soviet Union, humiliated 6-0 in the last game, and was trounced 8-1 in the 1981 Canada Cup, Canada rebounded to win the tournament in 1984, 1987 and 1991.

As Canadian hockey entered the final decade of a century in which it had, for the most part, led the world, all was well with the Canadian game. Or so it seemed, until the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 freed Eastern Europe's best players to join the NHL. Russian, Czech and Slovak players quickly established themselves among the league's best. The calibre of Swedish and Finnish players, no longer intimidated by Canadians, continued to rise. Today, Europeans lead the league in virtually all offensive categories. But cracks were showing in Canada's development system long before 1991. Although Canada was able to defeat the Soviet Union in the 1984 and 1987 Canada Cups, the victories were excruciatingly narrow and Canada always had home-ice advantage. Canadian teams won not because they had more talent, but because they were tougher and more determined to win.

Today, Canada has no edge in toughness, and Europeans, with plenty of NHL experience, have learned how to win.

In 1974, Toronto lawyer William McMurtry, in his report on violence in amateur hockey, warned that if Canadian leaders in the game "continue to encourage the present trends in hockey where skill is secondary to physical intimidation, then it is likely every other hockey nation will surpass North America in actual hockey skills."

Canadian hockey, of course, paid no attention.