



GAME IN CRISIS

PART VI

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 6 of 12

Competitive parents, coaches driving kids out of hockey
SCREAMERS / Getting yelled at, from the stands
or in the dressing room, isn't any kid's idea of fun.

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By William Houston

Sports Reporter

THE question is a simple one, but it seems to baffle leaders of Canadian youth hockey. What is the purpose of the kids' game?

To critics of the system, minor hockey may have more to do with providing entertainment for parents and coaches than engaging children in an enjoyable activity.

"I would suggest most minor hockey associations don't know what they're doing," said Rick Polutnik, a minor hockey coach and an executive with Hockey Alberta. "Many will say, 'Well, we're developing hockey players.'

"Well, if we're in the business of producing NHL players, we're a dismal failure. There aren't many of them making it to the NHL. And if the idea is to keep kids in the game, we're failing there, too."

Although Canada has more children playing hockey than any country in the world, about 475,000, the dropout rate skyrockets at age 12. Seventy-five per cent of the kids who start by age five or six have quit by age 15. Soccer, with a youth enrolment of about 530,000, has surpassed hockey as the most popular participation sport in Canada.

The decline in hockey at the teen-age level is one of the reasons Canada has fallen behind as a producer of top-level talent. For the most part, skilled players in the National Hockey League are European.

Adolescents leave hockey for reasons that include lifestyle, maturity, money and relationships. But they also drop out because they are old enough to make a decision independent of their parents. And by age 13, most of them don't want any part of what they consider a hostile environment.

In the early years, a child faces the problem of the overinvolved parent. At the arena they are called Screamer Dads and Screamer Moms.

Ray Lalonde, a minor hockey coach in Toronto, remembers one boy who insisted on carrying the puck down only one side of the rink. It turned out he was avoiding the other side because his parents were sitting there.

After a particularly loud father kept screaming orders to his child during a game, Lalonde approached him.

"I told him he was pretty loud," Lalonde recalled. "He said, 'Yeah, I get pretty excited.'

"I said, 'When your kid's on a swing in the school yard, do you stand behind him and yell, 'Swing! Swing! Swing!'"?

"And when he goes in the sandbox, do you yell at him, 'Dig! Dig deeper!'"?

"The kid's playing out there. Just let him play."

If a parent isn't yelling at a child, a coach probably is. A player, blamed for a loss, is berated in the dressing room. He may be cursed, grabbed, shaken or slapped.

Almost from the start, a child deals with rejection. In important games, a player, if he is not among the best on the team, will be benched and probably won't be told why. A tiering system that places children in different competitive levels, beginning at age eight, conveys to most kids that they're not good enough.

Dave Henderson, a 26-year-old investment banker in Toronto, went through the Metropolitan Toronto Hockey League and played some Junior B, but quit for a year at age 13.

"I got sick of the parents yelling, or a coach coming back after a game and blaming you for losing a game," he said. "A lot of good hockey players are destroyed at the age of 10 years old, not because they don't have the talent, but because they're turned off. You've got coaches who think they're running an NHL franchise and parents who put a lot of pressure on kids.

"It's brutal. It's almost mental abuse.

"They forget that hockey is played because it's supposed to be fun. And then they wonder why kids drop out and hockey is slipping a bit in this country."

By the time a child is 12 or 13, intimidation becomes an important coaching tactic.

Players are instructed to be aggressive and in some cases start fights. If they don't follow orders, they are benched or perhaps humiliated.

"I see it at the junior level where kids are sent out to fight their friends," said Marty Williamson, who coaches a Tier 2 junior team in Milton, Ont. "Then they phone up and apologize to the friend, saying the coach made them do it and if they didn't he was going to kick them off the team. It's bizarre."

A story that circulated in the MTHL this season was about a top-level 13-year-old who was his team's biggest player but wasn't aggressive enough to satisfy his coach. As punishment, he was required to wear a pink sweater and carry a purse in practice.

"It's win at all costs in minor hockey," said John Neville, a youth coach in Markham, Ont. "It's insanity."

Given the environment, the massive exodus of kids beginning at age 12 is not a surprise, but it is a concern to people in the system.

"Wake up, man," is Polutnik's message to minor hockey volunteer coaches and organizers.

"Hockey isn't as enjoyable as it should be. When there is that amount of pain and frustration, and a high dropout rate, something is wrong."

He says minor hockey associations need to understand that they exist not to entertain parents or sustain the ego of coaches. They are there to provide an activity for children, to teach them a game, give them some enjoyment and perhaps help build character.

"I believe that if our goal is to raise good citizens, and if we have good values and the children have good experiences in the game, more will stay in and more will make it, if that's what's important. So why not emphasize those values instead of winning?"