



# GAME IN CRISIS

## PART VII

### 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 7 of 12

Junior stars either must suffer goons or quit

**SURVIVAL OF FITTEST** / Hockey violence threatens to drive some of Canada's most skilled players out of the game.

Saturday, April 11, 1998

By William Houston

Sports Reporter

**RICHARD** Peacock scored his second goal of the season and also got into a fight during a rancorous engagement between his junior team, the Prince George Cougars, and the Tri-City Americans.

After the February game, Peacock told an interviewer that one-punching Regan Darby of the Americans, cutting him near the eye and sending him to the dressing room, was more rewarding than scoring a goal.

As those who watched Peacock play will attest, Canadian junior hockey, the major feeder system for the National Hockey League, produces plenty of hard-nosed competitors who can fight and check. But for pure skill, Canadian players today cannot match Europeans who lead the league in most scoring statistics.

Critics say an ineffective development system for players aged 6 to 16 is the main cause of the poorly trained Canadians. But junior hockey, which emphasizes size and aggression and condones fighting, is also blamed.

Some of the finest players Canada has produced, including Hall of Famer Mike Bossy, considered quitting hockey because of attacks in the junior leagues.

"When you know the intention of the opposing team is to get you out of the game, when you know that when you start a game you're going to get speared and you're going to have to fight, and you're going to have a goon lined up next to you, that's intimidating and it takes a lot of the fun out of it," Bossy said.

After Wayne Gretzky completed his first and only year of major-junior hockey with the Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds, his agent, Gus Badali, advised him to jump to the professional World Hockey Association, and not just for the money. Badali, concerned Gretzky might get hurt in an attack, felt his 17-year-old client would be safer in the pros where skilled players are generally left alone and heavyweights battle it out against each other.

Lee Fogolin, a former NHL player and a product of the Ontario major-junior league, says a young player at the wrong end of a punchup may never recover emotionally. "Sixteen is a tender age for a kid," he said. "And now all of a sudden he has some guy hanging a beating on him. It's a pretty fragile situation. Is he strong enough at that age to

say, 'Okay, well, that was a learning experience and I'm going to continue,' or does he go into a shell and never come out of it?"

Cory Cross, a 6-foot-5 defenceman, played junior hockey at Lethbridge, Alta., but refused to fight. He finally quit, opting, instead, for the University of Alberta and a spot on the varsity team. He's now one of the better defencemen for the NHL's Tampa Bay Lightning.

There are reasons, other than fighting, for good athletes to quit junior hockey or seek an alternative system. Sixteen year olds are almost always required to move away from home to play for the team that owns their rights. Unlike scholastically based development systems, the junior leagues reserve the right to trade players or demote them to a second-tier farm team in another city.

Fogolin says adapting to living away from home, competing to keep a spot on a team and finding time for a high school education are difficult enough for a teen-ager playing in a high-pressure elite league, never mind dealing with a trade midway through the school year.

"I can remember some real down times at that age," he said. "When you're with one team and all of a sudden they move you to another, it's that much worse."

Howie Meeker, a former NHL player, coach and commentator, calls junior operators "pirate slave traders." He says the old pre-1967 junior setup in which NHL teams owned the junior affiliates and, for the most part, recruited players from the region in which the teams were situated, was a more humane system. Generally, players stayed closer to home and weren't traded.

Although junior hockey is deemed to be a development league, it is, foremost, a business. Local ownership is dependent on gate revenue and revenue production is dependent on playing games. Winning is the key to selling tickets, and for a coach, a winning season could be his ticket to the NHL.

But games and winning, alone, do not advance a player's skill level. Even the stars handle the puck for only about 45 seconds in a game. Practice is needed to improve the fundamentals, but junior hockey's 2-to-1 practice-to-game ratio falls below the European 3-to-1 and sometimes 4-to-1 ratio.

In junior hockey, the margin of profit for the clubs is small, so owners cut costs by piling extra duties on the coach, such as managing, marketing and promoting the team, as well as scouting. As a result, the training of players suffers.

For several years, an additional source of income for owners has been expansion, in which existing clubs share in the entry fees charged to new teams. Junior leagues at all levels have expanded rapidly. Canada's three major-junior leagues have added 15 teams in 17 years.

But expansion dilutes talent, and the stars today are denied the opportunity of working together on the same team. The days are long gone when a couple of top junior prospects, such as Bobby Clarke and Reggie Leach of the Flin Flon Bombers, played on the same line and helped each other develop.

Moreover, the thinning of talent forces teams to recruit younger players. The Ontario Hockey League now drafts youngsters at 15. The Western Hockey League takes them at 14 years of age. Drafting that early not only discourages late bloomers, but it also removes good players from levels below junior and weakens the development structure.

Still, junior hockey's rough environment and long 66-game schedule prepares players for a gruelling professional career. A growing number of top European juniors come to

Canada's leagues to toughen up for a year or two. But for them, skills have already been learned in Europe's prejunior youth systems.

For the Canadian prospect who hasn't been taught as effectively in youth hockey, the junior leagues reinforce his primary skills of checking and playing aggressively.

Billy Harris, a former pro player and coach, says: "Junior hockey, to me, stands for survival of the fittest. The problem is, if you're a top athlete and you're getting the crap kicked out of you because you're a good player, most are going to say, 'I'm going to play tennis and learn how to ski.' "