



GAME IN CRISIS

PART VIII

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 8 of 12

Getting to the root of hockey's problems

ELITE FACTORY / Some parents in Toronto are fed up with the price their children pay for victory.

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By William Houston

Toronto -- IT is a hockey factory. It has more children enrolled in its amateur leagues than most countries, including Sweden, Finland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Russia, have participating in youth hockey. It is well financed and influential, and in the high-pressure environment of elite amateur hockey, it is a continuing source of controversy.

The Metropolitan Toronto Hockey League, with a membership of 50,000, reflects much of what is good about Canadian hockey. And it mirrors, in fact magnifies, the problems that plague the country's youth game.

The MTHL, at its elite level, is often hostile territory for children. It excludes many, traumatizes some and turns away potentially great players from the game.

The story of two elite atom teams (11-year-olds) helps illustrate why some good athletes quit hockey at an early age and why Canada has declined as a developer of the best players in the world.

"I could write you a story that would be headlined 'At What Price Victory?'" said a parent, who requested not to be identified. "The players here have been devastated."

The team is the North York Canadians, who won the MTHL major atom championship last week and on the weekend were competing in the Ontario playoffs.

The Canadians were built for the sole purpose of winning a title. The idea of developing players outside the team's core of stars was never a consideration. Five skaters, among the best in the country, were recruited from the Toronto area and promised as much ice time as they could handle.

"It was set up as a National Hockey League team," another parent said.

The central figure was Devereaux Heshmatpour, a defenceman who towers over his teammates and scored 74 goals in 40 regular-season games, according to his father. Devereaux, who is enrolled at Upper Canada College, also plays elementary-school hockey. On the weekends, he is trained for hours in skills and skating by Yasha Smushkin of Toronto, who is from Russia and is among the top hockey teachers in the world.

The budding career of Devereaux is guided by his father, Allen, a powerful parental influence on the North York Canadians who has been known to rent ice time for the sole

purpose of putting his son through a regimen of drills. A former athlete who wrestled and played football for Penn State in the 1970s, Allen Heshmatpour is a developer from Los Angeles who moved his family to Toronto so that Devereaux could play in the MTHL. Devereaux quickly emerged as the Canadians' star this season, but when it became obvious that only five or six players were getting ice time, the supporting cast started to drop out. Eventually, the number of players on the team shrank from the required roster of 14 to as few as nine. Over the course of the season, the club was fined hundreds of dollars by the MTHL for not icing a full lineup. Heshmatpour says the fines were picked up by the Canadians' association.

Ice time wasn't the only problem on the Canadians. Of far more concern to some parents was the hostile environment for the players. There were accusations of profanity.

"There were kids who left because of the language," one parent said.

A parent of one player who quit several months ago said his child could not continue after a dressing-down on the bench.

"My son was devastated," he said. "He's quit the game altogether. You've got a kid who, for the first time since he was 5, can't watch *Hockey Night in Canada*, doesn't want to skate."

Robert Law, general manager of the North York executive overseeing the Canadians, said allegations were brought up during the season, once during a hearing in which a player tried to get released from the team.

There were no return telephone calls received last week from the Canadians' coach, John Caranci, and Law declined to discuss the allegations, although he did say the coaching staff would not be returning next season.

One parent said the damage has already been done. "I have a kid who's going to be 12, and he's hung up his skates and he'll never play again. So what did hockey and the MTHL do for him? And at what price victory? In the end, the team ended up with a ringer trophy and a lot of casualties."

When Sandra and Steven Radcliffe heard complaints about the coach of their 11-year-old son, they weren't sure how to react.

Steven Radcliffe, manager of the North York Rangers major atom team, felt that Lorne Rappaport, the 24-year-old coach, was doing a good job.

But then he received calls from parents who complained about profanity. Said one parent, who requested not to be identified, "It was all swearing. He was calling the children [obscene names]. To my son, in particular, he would say you're too small, too weak, too slow, you're never going to make it in minor peewee. You shouldn't be in hockey in the first place. Maybe his whole strategy was to motivate through humiliation."

During the Christmas break, the Radcliffes noticed a change in their son, Andrew, the team's goalie.

"He turned from a normal sunny, happy kid to being belligerent at home and miserable," Sandra Radcliffe said. "He didn't want to go to hockey or do school work."

When pressed by his mother to reveal what was wrong, Andrew broke down and cried. He said Rappaport had warned the players not to discuss anything said in the dressing room. Finally, the child said the coach had used profanity toward him and other players.

Sandra Radcliffe said she confronted Rappaport twice, the second time after she says he cursed Andrew for letting in two goals early in a game.

Rappaport said he was never approached by Sandra Radcliffe, although he confirmed telling the kids not to discuss remarks uttered in the room, a practice that demands silence from children and creates an unhealthy environment, according to sports psychologists.

"It's the boys' time," Rappaport said, explaining the code of silence. "This is Triple-A hockey. They're 11-year-olds, and when they come to the arena, it was their time in the dressing room."

Rappaport declined to comment on whether he cursed his players, but Steve Davis, the top executive with the amateur body overseeing the North York team, said, "Up until Christmas, he had used some language in the dressing room."

In January, at the behest of the players, two parents joined Rappaport behind the bench for games. The coach's conduct improved, parents say, morale shot up and the team climbed from 11th to ninth place.

Still, an upbeat conclusion could not prevent the breakup of the team at the end of the season. Several parents pulled out their kids, not wanting them to be coached by Rappaport for another season. Other children were told they weren't wanted back. Sandra Radcliffe quoted Rappaport as telling her that he was looking to have the best team possible.

Concerns about Rappaport's conduct prompted the Radcliffes and the parents of four other players to send letters at the end of the season to the club executive outlining the problems and asking that he be removed.

Davis said the letters were interpreted as sour grapes from parents whose children were not invited back for next season, but Sandra Radcliffe said her motivation was to simply rid the organization of a problematic coach.

"We were already leaving," she said. "We wanted to try to avoid 15 other kids going through this same thing next year."

In its investigation, the association executive did not talk to any of the letter writers because, Davis said, their positions were already made clear. Parents of other players were called. No one had a complaint, Davis said. One thought everything had been "normal" by the standards of minor hockey.

The executive group ruled that Rappaport could stay. If conditions had been as bad as some parents alleged, Davis said, they should have issued a formal complaint at Christmastime.

Davis said a letter was sent to Rappaport warning him that verbal abuse would not be tolerated.

Rappaport said, "I'm absolutely disgusted about what these parents are trying to do."

In explaining the decision not to release Rappaport, Davis said, "In hockey, you get two sides to everything, right?"

Looking back, Steven Radcliffe said he agrees that action should have been taken earlier, although both he and his wife did express concerns to team officials during the season.

"I guess everybody at the elite level is afraid to make too much noise for fear of repercussion," Steven Radcliffe said. "If you're a complaining parent, they take it out on your son."

What concerns Sandra Radcliffe is the message sent to the players by the association's support of Rappaport.

"We tried hard to get him removed to show to our kids that when you come to us and there's a problem, we listen," she said. "We wanted to say to them, 'We believe you, and we'll go forward with it and people will fix it.'"

"What our kids have seen is that when they did all they're supposed to do, they weren't believed."