



GAME IN CRISIS

PART X

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 10 of 12

Big ice surface cited as key to Europeans' success

SKILL DEVELOPMENT / Many of today's top offensive players learned the game on Olympic-size rinks where speed counts.

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By William Houston

Sports Reporter

IN the 1960s, Anatoli Tarasov, the head of hockey in the Soviet Union, was asked who would win a one-on-one competition between Bobby Hull, Canada's greatest offensive player, and Anatoli Firsov, the legendary star of the Soviet national team.

"Probably Hull would win," Tarasov said. "But if they played two on two, it would be more interesting. Three on three, Firsov would win. Four on four, Firsov would win easily. Five on five, it wouldn't even be a game."

Whether five Anatoli Firsovs would rout five Bobby Hulls in a make-believe Canada-Russia game played in 1963 is esoteric stuff of hot-stove debate.

Tarasov's point was that Hull's terrific individual skills and sensational slapshot would be countered and bettered by the passing, playmaking and teamwork of the European player. Today, Europe produces most of the top offensive players in the world, partly because of superior passing and playmaking. Canada has slipped as a developer of talent because of weak training, but also as a result of a factor over which Canadian coaches and players have no control: Europeans learn the game on big ice; Canadians do not.

"The Olympic-size rink helps in skill development, there's no question about it," said Lou Vairo, an executive with USA Hockey and a former U.S. Olympic coach.

In the 1980s, Vairo advised U.S. communities to build European-sized rinks (200 by 100 feet) instead of the smaller National Hockey League surfaces (200 by 85 feet).

"I had three reasons for that," he said. "It wouldn't cost that much more, the large ice might attract international competitions and the players coming up would develop into top-level international players."

Ron Dussiaume, a master coach conductor with Canada's national coaching certification program, says big ice helps development in all key areas.

"The larger ice surface gives you more room," he said. "But large ice also corresponds with more speed. If there is more room, you have to be faster to cover the distance, like the defenceman moving from the middle lane to the boards. His speed and acceleration must increase. The larger ice forces you to be extremely fast, because if you are not, you'll never get there on time."

The time and space that becomes available to players on the large ice surface also allows them to hone puckhandling, passing and creative skills.

"It gives you room to stickhandle and you can take a little longer to make plays," Vairo said. "Players get better at passing and stickhandling, and they get more comfortable with the puck. They [Europeans] handle the puck a lot more than our players do. Our players on the small rink don't have the time to handle the puck, even in a peewee game [13-year-olds], because they're being banged by someone."

NHL players today are at least 15-per-cent larger than they were when the league started up in 1917-18. They are also faster, but they are still playing on the same-sized sheet of ice used 80 years ago. The result is a constricted, over-heated game that critics call pinball hockey. The forecheck makes everything happen quickly. The puck bounces off a player's stick onto another, or caroms off the boards. There is little time to carry the puck and limited space in which to make a play.

The Nagano Olympics, played on the large ice, opened the eyes of hockey fans unaccustomed to international hockey. Several in the U.S. media wrote approvingly of the Olympic game, observing that it was more artistic and creative than NHL hockey. For similar reasons, aficionados such as Dussiaume, a former pro who once played for Don Cherry, and Billy Harris, the former player and coach and an author, prefer the style of hockey played on European ice.

Still, NHL executives say the league would never consider switching to the European surface, not only because it is virtually impossible to add ice to an arena without subtracting seats, but also because the league considers the European game dull.

"The NHL is built around forechecking and action in front of the net," said Glen Sather, the president of the Edmonton Oilers. "In the European game, everything is from the outside. A lot of European games become boring -- technical, but boring. And there's not enough hitting."

Even Vairo said, "Hockey's not as exciting on the big rink as the small rink."

Given the advantages of developing players on large ice, one solution could be for youth hockey in Canada to use big ice for training kids 11 years old and up. The smaller children could play on a half a surface. Pro hockey, because it's committed to the frenzied, constrained game, could continue with its 200 by 85 sheet.

Another solution, albeit radical, is for the NHL to use four skaters a side instead of five. Not only would this open up the game, said Vairo, but clubs would save money on salaries because they would not need as many players. Not that the NHL Players Association is likely to agree to roster deductions.

The solution, most say, is for the International Ice Hockey Federation, the European-based governing body, and the NHL to get together and establish dimensions acceptable to both sides.

Peter Martin, the head of the Hamilton amateur hockey association, observes that hockey is the only international sport that does not have a standard surface. The size of baseball parks vary, but the fundamental dimensions, from plate to mound, base to base, are consistent.

A compromise makes sense to Toronto lawyer William McMurtry, who played university hockey and wrote the 1974 Ontario report on violence in amateur hockey.

"There's no question ours is too small and theirs is too big," McMurtry said. "I remember saying this to John Ziegler [the former NHL president] in the 1980s. I said, 'You don't have to go to 100 feet across. But go to 92 feet.' It would be recognition that the players have gotten bigger. And it would make the perfect game."