



GAME IN CRISIS

PART XI

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 11 of 12

Cherry admits all is not rosy with hockey

ON THE AIR / Commentators defend the system,
but guess who's getting ready to speak out?

Thursday, April 16, 1998

By William Houston

Sports Reporter

NOT long after the Canadian men's hockey team finished out of the medals at the Nagano Olympics, former National Hockey League referee Bruce Hood spoke to a group in Oakville, Ont.

During his speech, Hood addressed Canada's decline as a hockey power. Confronting a touchy subject, he said Canadian hockey was in bad shape and the country's development system needed an overhaul.

The crowd gave him a standing ovation.

Michael Clarfield, a sports medicine physician and Toronto Maple Leaf team doctor, says virtually everyone he talks to believes Canadian hockey needs to be reformed as a training ground for kids.

"I talk to hockey people every day, people at the high and low levels of the game, parents, etcetera, and everyone agrees the system is wrong," Clarfield said. "They don't want their kids playing that much. The kids are overcoached. That's the big majority."

In interviews, minor hockey coaches, parents, former players, some commentators and even NHL general managers agreed the youth training in Canadian hockey isn't doing the job.

"Everybody I talk to says the same thing," said Hood, who works part time as a hockey commentator. "Nagano was a wakeup call, because our game of hockey in Canada sucks."

Still, the sports media, particularly in hockey, have steered clear of the issue. Commentators are more likely to say Canada's poor showing at Nagano was caused by poor coaching or faulty player selection than a lack of talent.

"It is a very sensitive area," says Billy Harris, a former player and coach, and an author. "I agree that there is something wrong with our system, but you hate to be critical of volunteers who keep our minor system going."

One of the strongest supporters of the status quo is the CBC's *Hockey Night in Canada*, despite the network's concern over the declining quality of play in the NHL. Commentator Don Cherry has built his reputation on promoting tough, aggressive hockey, admiring a good fight and denouncing European players. In addition to being the

host of *HNIC*, Ron MacLean is also an amateur referee and a participant in the hockey development system. He defends the Canadian game whenever he feels it is under attack. After the Nagano Games, MacLean and Cherry rejected the notion the Canadian team was outplayed and, instead, offered a variety of explanations for its weak performance. They included: We didn't play our game. We didn't hit. Too many centres. Wayne Gretzky should have been selected for the shootout. A hot goalie. Eric Lindros hit the post.

Prodded by MacLean, Cherry chided those who thought Canada's loss reflected poorly on the country's development system. He compared Canadian hockey to baseball in the United States.

"How about the States?" he asked. "The States and the world. How about the MVP? For the National League, it was Larry Walker -- foreigner. Now we have the most valuable player in the World Series. A Cuban. We have the guy pitching that gave up the hit -- a Cuban. The guy that made the hit that scored the winning run -- Colombian or something. Another foreigner. And the guy that scored the run was a foreigner. . . . And you don't see the States saying they're bad like we are here. We lost. But we'll be ready next year."

"I agree," MacLean said.

Cherry's argument was echoed by at least one other commentator. When a sports journalist was asked on TSN if Canadians should be concerned about its hockey system, he said, dismissively, they should not. Countries such as the United States and Russia have not commissioned inquiries, so why should Canada?

But hockey is not the U.S. national game and Russia fared relatively well at Nagano. For Canada, hockey is the country's invention and passion. If a Dream Team of U.S. baseball players lost a World Cup tournament and then bombed out in the Olympics two years later, U.S. sports fans would want answers. Furthermore, the decline of baseball in the United States, particularly among African Americans, is already an issue.

Cherry's contention that Canada still produces the best players in the world frustrates those who see him as a potential spokesman for reform. As hockey's most influential media figure, he could, from his pulpit in his bullying style, tell parents and coaches that more practice time is needed for children, teaching skills is more important than winning, and fighting should be left to the pros.

"He just keeps up that circus act and keeps insisting that everything's just great," said Howie Meeker, a former player, coach and commentator. "He is a great entertainer and he's got an act going, but he's hurting the development of hockey."

Cherry reacts predictably to the fact that Europeans lead the NHL in most scoring statistics. Points are not the sole measure of great a player, he said.

"Hockey is not just getting points and skating like Sonja Henie. Hitting is skill, body checking is a great skill, back checking is a great skill. And -- I know people hate fighting -- but fighting is a skill."

But then a surprise: He agrees that changes are needed in the development of Canadian players.

"We do have faults; there's no doubt about it," he said. "The one thing I would like to see is more practices. I would like to see less games and I would like to see them handling the puck more -- but I've always felt that way."

Then why hasn't he said this on the air?

"I'm going to have a statement on that," he said. "My son and I have talked it over."

He says the momentous occasion will occur during the NHL playoffs.

Has the mountain moved?

Just what was said

Thursday, April 16, 1998

Highlights of a speech by NHL commissioner Gary Bettman yesterday in Toronto:

I'm here to tell you what I have repeatedly said for more than five years. I firmly believe that the future of hockey in Canada is strong, and it is vital. But the future does not mean we can take our sport for granted. It must be cared for, it must be culled, and its problems must be addressed . . . We have, as you all know, six NHL teams in Canada. I'm sure you don't need to be reminded that three years ago, the number was eight . . .

Player salaries are rising, as they are in all sports. And if over time this collective bargaining agreement doesn't work, then we'll get a new one, and we'll do what it takes to make sure we have one that works. But I believe over time, this one will work.

And just keep in mind that salary doesn't equal team performance. Two of the highest payroll teams in the league this year are not going to make the playoffs. . . . So player salaries are not the key element in the health of Canadian teams.

Sure, there's the issue of the Canadian dollar versus the U.S. dollar, but our Canadian clubs will tell you we are dealing with that issue in significant measure with the currency-assistance plan that we passed a few years ago . . .

We took strong notice recently of a study that showed the number of young people participating in the sport of hockey in Canada has fallen to be the second most popular sport in the country behind soccer . . . We must work hard to reverse that trend.

In Canada, for the most part, arenas are built with private money, and in the United States, the vast bulk of the arenas are heavily subsidized if not outright built by the local communities . . .

I've heard Prime Minister Chrétien, on at least two occasions, say that a weak dollar is good for the Canadian economy. I understand it. I agree with it, but it does make it tough on Canadian teams. While Canada export industries thrive, Canada's NHL teams seeking to be competitive, are handicapped . . .

As [Jean] Beliveau noted on April 3, the Montreal Canadiens pay \$10-million in municipal taxes on the new Molson Centre. The Ottawa Senators pay \$3-million. As an aside, the \$3-million that the Senators pay is more than all 20 U.S.-based teams paid combined . . .

What I've seen in a couple of instances, I'll use Montreal and Ottawa as the two examples, are instances where there have been substantial private investments, over \$230-million in Montreal for the new Molson Centre, I believe the biggest construction project in the last decade in downtown Montreal, a boon we believe to the City of Montreal.

In addition to the fact that they have paid \$10-million a year in taxes, which is unheard of in virtually every other place, while they were building the building, I am told, the [city] was billing the Molson Centre for the lost revenues for the parking meters while there was construction going on.

If it weren't so serious, it could almost be humorous because you can't lose sight of the big picture. Namely these teams, in addition to what they may mean from a cultural standpoint, also represent economic vibrancy in the countries that they're in. . . .

Under the circumstances, such as the ones I have just described, Canadian teams start the season, start each year, at a disadvantage to their counterparts in the United States.