



GAME IN CRISIS

PART XII

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.

Last in a series of 12 parts

Correcting hockey woes is child's play

THE SOLUTION / Canada's amateur governing body needs to stop the win-at-all-cost attitude that is driving away young players in droves.

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By William Houston

Sports Reporter

IT was invented in Canada, nurtured in this country and showcased to the world by Canadian players. Hockey is Canada's game and for years the nation's stars dominated the sport.

But today the game is in trouble. Canada has declined as a producer of top-level players and it has also alienated its greatest resource -- the children who participate in the sport. Too many drop out, and those who stay cannot match their European counterparts in talent.

Most of the leading offensive stars in the National Hockey League these days are from European countries, although Europeans make up only 22 per cent of the league while Canadians account for 61 per cent. Canadians are increasingly relegated to second-line and third-line positions on NHL teams.

Murray Costello, president of the Canadian Hockey Association, the amateur governing body, sees problems in the country's youth development system and says reform is long overdue.

"I don't think anybody can take issue with most everything you're saying [in The Globe and Mail series]," he said. "It's not as good as it used to be and it's not as good as it should be overall."

While observing that Canadian hockey still provides a healthy and wholesome experience for many children, Costello acknowledges that a pervasive win-at-all-cost attitude is choking the youth game and denying children an opportunity to learn skills.

No trend better illustrates the extent to which parents and coaches will go to win games than the parental approval of steroid use among 14-year-old hockey players.

Phil Zullo, a fitness instructor and personal trainer in Toronto, says he has been approached on several occasions by parents seeking steroids for their sons in minor hockey.

"It's happened three or four times now, fathers asking me about it," said Zullo, who warned them against steroid use. "And at least one father, I know for a fact, put his son on it."

The consuming need to win not only cultivates drug use, but also physical and emotional abuse of children. Participants in minor hockey have cited incident after incident of children as young as 10 being hit or profanely humiliated by parents and coaches.

One coach in the Metropolitan Toronto Hockey League forced his 11-year-old players this season to take off their helmets, get down on their hands and knees and push pucks along the ice with their noses. This was punishment for the team's weak passing in a game. After a parent pulled his son off the ice, the boy was handed a one-game suspension by the coach for not participating in the so-called practice.

"It's compete, compete, compete, win, win, win at all costs," Costello said. "Parents and coaches and minor-hockey associations have to accept that the game is for the kids. And as long as they're having fun -- with or without competition -- they'll still develop."

There are no quick fixes for a broken volunteer system that has grown increasingly elitist, obsessed with winning, hostile to the people it is supposed to be serving and ineffective in developing skills. Still, there is a way to turn it around, coaches, former players, administrators and parents say.

For starters, the CHA needs to speak out strongly against the pervasive win-at-all-cost attitude that is driving children away from the game. The association, perhaps enlisting the help of Canada's best players, should launch a campaign to get its message out to Canadians.

Coaches and parents should be told to de-emphasize winning and intimidation, play fewer games, practice more and make it enjoyable. This will be the challenge facing CHA executive Bob Nicholson, who will succeed Costello as president in June.

Toronto Maple Leafs president Ken Dryden and others believe a national forum would be a useful way to discuss problems in minor hockey, seek answers and, perhaps most important, publicize the issue.

Local minor-hockey associations are often controlled by a small group of people whose values and motives may or may not be appropriate to child development and skill training. Rick Polutnik of the Alberta amateur hockey association says pressure needs to be placed on these organizations to widen participation and get new voices into the decision-making process.

Other recommendations include:

Enforce zero tolerance for coaches who abuse children. Too many club executive bodies give coaches accused of emotional or physical assaults the benefit of the doubt.

Reduce elitism. Children are tiered into levels of ability at the age of eight. The message conveyed to a player cut from a team is that he is not good enough. Many will drop out.

Junior hockey drafts players at 14. Tiering should not begin until the age of 12 and adolescents should not be drafted into junior hockey until age 16.

Take fighting and stickwork out of minor and junior hockey. Pro hockey condones fighting because it appeals to a core demographic, but there's no place in the amateur game for violence outside the rules. Fighting in junior hockey should bring a game misconduct, with graduated suspensions to repeat offenders. Suspensions for fighters in children's hockey should be increased. Coaches who assemble goon teams should be fired.

Cut back on the number of games children play. During a season, a 10-year-old may compete in as many as 140 games, counting weekend tournaments. He won't come close to meeting the 3-to-1 practice-to-game ratio recommended by the CHA. Canada should take its lead from the European model. Have kids participating in three or four practices for every game. Teach them offensive skills. Top-level Canadian children play 12 months

of the year. In the summer, it's weekend tournaments and power-skating classes during the week. Instead of playing year round, borrow from the Europeans. Use the off-season for dryland training and participation in sports other than hockey to improve a player's athleticism.

Keep bodychecking out of the game until children are 12. That will give players a chance to practice skills in game conditions without fear of injury.

Move toward a larger ice surface. The European sheet, which is 15 feet wider than North American ice, forces children from the age of 11 to become better skaters. And big ice gives them the time and space needed to apply skills in games. Costello supports the idea of new community arenas being built to European size, if it is affordable. "It would be great," he said. "I think that as an organization, the CHA board could be convinced fairly quickly to make that recommendation -- that every renovation, every new building should have international ice."

Return hockey to the schools. In the old days, the game was played at the elementary and high-school level.

But for a variety of reasons, the practice ended, for the most part, 25 years ago. Costello approves of schools getting back into youth hockey. Arenas for the most part are empty on weekdays and classroom schedules built around ice time would not only keep the arenas in use, but provide valuable practice time. High-school hockey, because of peer recognition, would also provide an incentive for adolescents to stay in the game and an alternative to junior hockey. "Hockey should be in the schools," said Howie Meeker, a former player, coach and commentator who has operated hockey schools for years. "That's where you have control, that's where you have half-sensible people who can develop a child physically and intellectually." The financing of public- and secondary-school hockey would be accomplished as it is in minor hockey, through fund-raising efforts and participation fees.

Provide more government funding. The U.S. amateur body has an annual budget of \$20-million (U.S.). When converted to Canadian funds, it is nearly three times larger than the \$10-million that the CHA receives from Ottawa. Meeker says money should be spent to improve the calibre of the volunteer coach. He proposes a degree program for hockey teachers. Graduates would work at the grassroots level. They would instruct volunteers on how to teach and coach and would supervise the training of children.

Reduce the cost of hockey. Once a blue-collar sport, the game is now affordable only to the affluent. It can cost parents \$5,000 a year and more to keep a child in elite minor hockey. "Some of the best players in our history have come from the low end of the economic scale," Costello said. "They're being lost to the game because of the elitism." Costello, Meeker, Polutnik and others are optimistic that hockey can find its way back, but the focus needs to be on the child rather than the ego of a parent or coach, one of whom dreams of a son playing in the NHL and the other a pro career behind the bench. Minor hockey is for children. It is about playing a game and learning appropriate life skills. If a child in Canada dreams of an NHL career, it's not as a fighter or checker, which too often is the final product these days. He aspires to be Wayne Gretzky or Jaromir Jagr. Minor hockey owes the child a chance to achieve the goal and also enjoy playing a game.

Last in the series.