

College Hockey: GUEST COMMENTARY: Controlling The Escalating College Hockey Arms Race

by **Gerald D. Skoning**/Special to www.USCHO.com

March 6 — The rosters of Division I college hockey teams consist almost entirely of players who have spent a year or two playing for “junior” hockey clubs. Only a very few players on these Division I clubs have entered college directly out of high school. As a result, the quality of college hockey has been enhanced, but this improvement has had a negative impact on the “student” part of the vaunted student-athlete experience.

The mother of a freshman hockey star for an ECAC team candidly expressed her dismay after watching her son’s team lose to another perennial ECAC powerhouse by a score of 3-2. Her concern wasn’t over the team’s loss on the ice, but rather over her son’s academic difficulties.

I had asked her how he was doing in the classroom his first term in college. She sighed, “Unfortunately, he’s really struggling. He was an ‘A’ student in high school, graduating near the top his class. We were so proud of his academic success. But, then he was away from the classroom for a whole year while he played 75 games in Juniors for the Flin Flon Bombers of the Saskatchewan Junior Hockey League. He’s a better hockey player for it, but he is really rusty with the books.”

It’s a familiar story for many families of kids who aspire to Division I hockey. The rosters of most every Division I hockey program are filled with kids who played in Alberta (AJHL), Ontario (CJHL), Sioux City, Iowa (USHL), or British Columbia (BCHL). They range from 20- or 21-year-old freshmen to 24-year-old seniors who are stronger, faster, smarter and much older hockey players than those who just graduated from high school.

They play a year or two in juniors in the hopes of improving their recruitment opportunities and perhaps landing full-ride scholarships at one of the traditional college hockey powerhouses like North Dakota, Wisconsin, or Michigan. Most likely, their dreams also include a high NHL draft position, based in part on their experience in juniors.

Junior programs are a Canadian tradition as iconic as the Mounties or the Maple Leaf. Long before college hockey teams in the U.S. began recruiting heavily out of juniors, those programs attracted Canadian players with NHL aspirations. Juniors rivalries provided a live hockey entertainment alternative to the infamous “Hockey Night in Canada” broadcasts on CBC on long winter nights in small towns dotting the frozen tundra of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Ontario.

Today, college hockey coaches love the junior programs. They recruit players who are battle-tested, and whose skills have been polished beyond the rough-edged talent seen in high school hockey. To college coaches, it’s like having a farm team system from which to draw a talented roster. College coaches regularly tell talented high school recruits to defer admission for a year or two for some seasoning and development in the juniors. A ready-made farm system.

Also, the pervasive junior program makes recruiting college hockey players much easier for coaches. Instead of screening hockey recruits from hundreds of high schools scattered across the United States and Canada, college hockey coaches have a ready-made, pre-screened pool of candidates. This cuts down on recruiting travel and expense ... one-stop shopping in the USHL, AJHL, BCHL, and so on.

On so many levels this system is hard to argue with. Of course, parents love the juniors as well. To them, it may save the family a staggering tuition bill of up to \$45 thousand per year. For them, delaying college for a year or even two is well worth the personal sacrifice their kids make in playing a 70- to 80-game season (or two) in remote regions of the Canadian wilderness.

The number of players on a college hockey roster who have come directly from high school has dwindled to a precious few. The two or three who do play varsity Division I hockey have become mere tokens, for all intents and purposes. But they are players for whom the academic challenges of higher education will be less daunting since they were enrolled in school the entire year before entering college.

How did we get to this point? When did this new, higher level of professionalism creep into the wonderful game of college hockey? Other major college sports like football, basketball and baseball have no such junior programs to groom their athletes. There are no “junior” football or basketball programs to develop and burnish young talent (although some may claim junior colleges occasionally serve that purpose). Yet the quality of play on college gridirons and basketball courts in the United States is remarkably strong. Why is ice hockey different?

Maybe it relates to the NHL aspirations of the hockey player or the hockey parents, or both. Or, perhaps it’s the lure of full-ride athletic scholarships that motivates the kids to make this enormous personal sacrifice.

One wonders if it is possible to “unring the bell” and return to recruitment of student-athletes for college hockey directly out of high school. Of course, no college hockey coach is likely to be the first unilaterally to spurn recruiting those hot junior hockey prospects. Such a move would be wildly unpopular with alumni, fans, current players looking for talented freshmen to bolster championship prospects, and students who long for a national championship.

A coach refusing to recruit junior hockey prospects would be as unpopular as a U.S. president deciding unilaterally to eliminate our country’s nuclear arsenal. The coach who unilaterally decides it’s important to the student-athlete to return to recruiting directly out of high school would be summarily fired and ridden out of town on a rail.

The issue is worthy of attention by the entire college hockey community. Colleges and universities that recruit predominantly from various junior hockey programs should recognize the academic sacrifices their recruiting practices perpetuate.

The NCAA should study the issue of the increasing dominance of junior hockey recruiting to determine whether it would be feasible to impose a uniform nationwide stand-down in this increasingly competitive juniors arms race, and return to recruiting athletes directly out of high school. This might go a long way toward putting the “student” back in the student-athlete equation.

Mr. Skoning is a Chicago attorney who specializes in labor and employment law. He was captain of the 1964 Princeton University hockey team (which did not win the Ivy League championship, as this year’s team did for the first time in 55 years). While attending the University of Michigan Law School, he was assistant captain of a team sponsored by Jiffy Mix Company, consisting of several Michigan players from their 1963 NCAA championship team. The Jiffy team, which played in the International Metro League based in Southern Ontario, won the Michigan State Amateur Championship in 1966 and the U.S. Amateur Championship in 1967. After service as an officer in the U.S. Navy, he played for 10 years with the Chicago Cardinals of the Continental Hockey League.■