

When it comes to homegrown hockey talent, Massachusetts is in a...State of decline

By Stephen Harris

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Such are Bob Turow's credentials as a judge of youth hockey talent that it was he who recommended the Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds select a 15-year-old named Joe Thornton in the 1995 Ontario Hockey League draft.

These days, Turow is in a dual role, heading the prestigious Prospects Hockey Tournaments in Toronto and serving as director of central scouting for the junior United States Hockey League.

For many years, Turow has watched teams of the finest players from Massachusetts competing in Prospects tournaments or in USA Hockey national select festivals. He has seen innumerable young Mass. teams excel and watched many of their players go onto greatness in the college or pro ranks.

But Turow acknowledges, sadly, that he has seen the quality of Massachusetts youth teams decline significantly in recent years.

"When I go see the Mass. teams play at all these festivals, I'm really disappointed," said Turow. "I don't see the depth in talent coming from Massachusetts anymore. Maybe I'm wrong. Scouting is a subjective art, so I could be wrong. But I've got to tell you, I don't see it. Something is going on down there."

Competing in a Prospects tourney a couple of weeks ago were several Boston Icemen teams that were essentially All-Star collections with most of the top age-group players from Massachusetts. It did not go well. Teams in the 1992, 1994, 1995 and 1996 birth-year groups - kids ranging in age from 9-14 - combined for a record of 1-13-1.

Facing some of the strongest teams from Canada and the rest of the United States, the Mass. players often seemed overmatched in skating, puck skills and hockey sense. Consequently, they were outscored, 103-38.

Not to draw dire and ironclad conclusions from one weekend of children's games, but is there a basic problem with Massachusetts youth hockey? Even in these young age groups, have the Bay State's players already fallen far behind their Canadian peers?

"The short answer," said Turow, "is yes."

Not like it used to be

It's not too difficult to find evidence to support this troubling notion, starting with the obvious observation even a casual local hockey fan can make:

This was a state that in years past produced the likes of Rod Langway, Bobby Carpenter, Tom Barrasso, Jeremy Roenick, Keith Tkachuk, Tony Amonte and many more who grew into superstars of the NHL, or darned close to it.

Certainly, Massachusetts, with more than 44,000 registered youth hockey players, continues to produce future NHLers, but far fewer are attaining the same level of success as their forbears.

At this year's NHL Scouting Combine in Toronto, May 30-June 3 - an NFL-style evaluation of 115 of the top prospects for the upcoming entry draft - only two Massachusetts kids are invited to take part.

A comparably disturbing indicator is the World Junior Tournament. For decades after the tourney began in the mid-70s, Team USA rosters were regularly filled with Massachusetts-born players. But in the past five years, there have been only eight Mass. representatives on USA junior teams - although only five different players, with Chris Bourque, Cory Schneider and Ryan Whitney going twice each.

Over the same period, Michigan sent 25 players to the teams. Minnesota had 24. New York (13), Wisconsin (9), with even Illinois equaling the Mass. total. More than a dozen other states were also represented.

"The World Junior is the No. 1 showcase, just the very best players in the whole United States at ages 18 and 19," said Boston College coach Jerry York. "And we just do not have a good representation from this state."

"It's pretty alarming when you look at it. The kids are from everywhere now, but there's not a lot of Massachusetts kids on the USA junior team."

BU associate head coach David Quinn played for the USA junior team in the mid-80s and coached it two years ago. When I played, we had 10 kids from New England, said Quinn. When I coached, we had two. The dropoff has been dramatic.

York has been recruiting players from Massachusetts for some 33 years at Clarkson, Bowling Green and now BC. This year's Eagles roster included 10 Bay State natives. Still, York said, in recent years it's gotten harder to find qualified players in this state.

"No question, no question at all," said York. "Through the 80s and early-90s we were really producing some tremendous players. We still have some good players, but for some reason - and I really can't put my finger on why - it's not like it used to be. We see it at the college level and the pros see it at the next level."

Recognizing the problem

So just what the heck is going on around here? How in the world can you explain how what was the USA's top hotbed for hockey talent now can't even beat Illinois in turning out good players?

"It's a big topic that everyone is talking about right now, about this dip," said former BC star Jerry Buckley, the president and commissioner of the Eastern Hockey Federation, the youth hockey league generally considered the finest in this region.

"We're trying to figure it out, but I don't think anyone has any definite answers on what's going on," said Buckley. "We have everything here. We should produce very good players. We've got plenty of ice, plenty of facilities, plenty of money and certainly enough numbers of players participating. We should have the development.

"I mean, we still are developing good players at schools like BC and BU (11 rostered players last season) and have some good Massachusetts players. But we don't seem to be developing the stars the way we did."

One reason may be an essential demographic change in the typical Massachusetts player, said ex-BC standout Peter Masters, who heads the Boston Junior Bruins organization.

Like the Mass.-dominated Icemen, the Junior Bruins assemble spring/summer All-Star youth teams and generally do pretty well against stiff competition. But in many cases, they stock their teams largely with players from other states like New York, New Jersey, Ohio, California and Florida.

"When I grew up, most of the top kids seemed to be from Boston, Dorchester, Charlestown, Arlington, Southie, Medford and towns like that," said Masters. "I really think those types of kids were brought up differently than some of the kids who are playing now. It was a tougher kid, a scrappier kid. I just think the kid playing today isn't as gritty.

"Players now are more skilled than 20 years ago. Look at NHL guys compared to the NHL guys in the '80s and '90s. They're bigger, faster and stronger. It's the same at the youth level. The kids are bigger, faster, stronger and their skills are better. But they don't compete nearly as hard as they used to. The mental toughness, the grind, just isn't there."

And Masters thinks he knows why.

"Back then, parents would yell at their own kid, 'Skate harder, move,' " he said. "Now the parents are yelling at the other players or the coaches or the refs. It's everyone else's fault. When you're sending the wrong message for 10 years, that has to have an effect on players by the time they're 16 or 17."

Many observers blame the talent decline on the fact top area leagues allow hitting for kids as young as 6 or 7, and certainly by 9. Canadian hockey for 20 years didn't allow hitting until about 13. A few years ago, the lowest age was cut briefly to 9, but then raised to 11.

"The contact is killing the development," said Bruins New England amateur scout Tom Songin. "Massachusetts hockey is really in trouble. The last few years, I've seen the quality of play go way down. If they don't fix this fast, in a few years there won't be anyone around here for me to scout.

"They've got to get the hitting out for these little kids. You see a kid trying to carry the puck or make a play, and he's getting slashed or crushed into the boards. How's a kid going to develop hockey skills when it's like that?"

Too much of a good thing

For Turow, one simple fact is at the core of the apparent growing ability gap between the Mass. and Canadian youngsters:

"In Canada, our best athletes are playing hockey," he said. "An awful lot of your best athletes down there typically are playing baseball or football or basketball. Those are the sports that are ingrained in the USA, and I don't see it shifting to hockey in huge numbers.

"The truth of the matter is - and please don't take this the wrong way, because I'm not a racist - but your best athletes are African-Americans, who aren't usually choosing hockey."

There seems universal agreement about one crucial problem with Mass. Hockey: For the top-level young players, the leagues and teams are far too watered down, the talent spread far too wide.

A city like Chicago has just four so-called youth teams at the AAA level - denoting the highest-quality of play. Pittsburgh has only two. Immediately around Boston, there are at least two dozen teams purporting to AAA status - and not nearly enough legitimately talented players to stock them.

"We're so fragmented here in the Boston area," said Buckley. "We've got the EHF, Metro (the Metropolitan Boston Hockey League), the selects and various other leagues. From a development standpoint, we've got to find a way to bring it all together."

And the good players in Massachusetts, because of all the competing leagues, just don't get enough chance to play with and against the best players.

"I just find in the States everyone has their own little castle and they fight to protect it," said Turow. "Often times, the players are the ones who suffer because of it."

Bruins winger Tom Fitzgerald has coached Boston youth teams at Prospects the last two years, and seen with his own eyes that the Massachusetts kids have a hard time competing with the Canadians.

"The people in charge of Mass. Hockey, the EHF, Metro and the selects need to get together and figure out how we can all work together," said Fitzgerald. "We're all in this together."