

What is the Rush? Is 16 too young to play in the OHL?

Thank you very much to the person who submitted this excellent article. I'd also like to thank you for the hard work and the time you put into this research. It is definitely a **MUST read for all!**

What is the Rush? Is 16 too young to play in the OHL?

Numbers show vast majority encounter being traded or outright cut

We have all heard it - come to the OHL when you are a 16 year-old, grade 11 student and it will be the fast track to the NHL. It is repeated so often, and has been for so long that players and parents make life altering decisions believing these words are facts.

Technology and the Internet now allow us to examine these words commonly used by OHL recruiters, scouts, general managers and coaches. Guess what? The words and promises are nothing more than a myth!

NHL summary of OHL underage players 1986-1989 birth years

- 289 played at least 1 OHL game as a grade 11, 16 year-old underage
- 1 player played full time in the NHL as a 20 year-old or younger (Jordan Staal)
- 1 player played full time in the NHL as a 20 year-old (Wotjek Wolski)
- 1 player played 1 game in the NHL as 20 year-old or younger (Ryan Parent)
- 7 players played a handful of games in the NHL as a 21 year-old (Bryan Bickell-3, David Bolland-1, Patrick Keleta-7, Rob Schremp 1, Bryan Young-15, Michael Blunden-9) **All of the 7, including Ryan Parent, began the 2007-2008 season out of the NHL in the AHL.**
- It should also be noted that Bryan Little, Marc Staal and Bobby Ryan are 1986 20 year-olds starting the year in the NHL in 2007-2008.
- **At the beginning of the 2007-2008 season, only 5 of the 289 OHL 16 year-old 1986-1989 underages were in the NHL.**

There is a possibility that a few more players who were OHL underagers in the 1986-89 age range may play some games in the NHL as some are still 18-20, however history suggests if there are any, the number will be nominal.

For those thinking Patrick Kane and Sam Gagner should be included here, it is important to note that neither player played their 16 year-old development year in the OHL.

Summary of 1986-89 OHL underage players traded, cut and/or waived

Are 16 year-old, grade 11 underage players ready to play in the OHL. The numbers suggest not.

- 289 played at least 1 OHL game as a grade 11, 16 year-old underage
- 73 (or 25.255%) of the 289 had be cut or waived out of the OHL before they were 19

- 140 (or 48.44%) of the 289 had be traded at least once while playing in the OHL.
- There is the likelihood that several of the 1988 or 1989 birth years will be traded or cut either this year or next.

Therefore, we looked at just the 1986 and 1987 birth year players who played as underagers in the OHL to get an indication of what the overall numbers will be once the 1988's and 1989's graduate through the OHL.

Traded or Cut/Waived 1986 and 1987's Underages

- 141 1986 or 1987's played at last 1 OHL game as a grade 11, 16 year-old underage
- 37 (or 26.24%) of the 141 had been cut or waived out of the OHL before they were 19
- 83 or (or 58.9%) of the 141 had been traded at least once while playing in the OHL

85% were either cut or traded while in the OHL.

Further statistics revealed the following:

- The 269 players who were forwards or defencemen combined for a plus minus of -705 in their underage year in the OHL
- Only 8 of the 269 players who were forwards or defencemen scored 20 or more goals in their underage year in the OHL
- Not 1 goalie had played a game in the NHL before he was 20

So why doesn't the OHL change back to a 16 year-old draft?

It is safe to say that the OHL, like all forms of junior hockey, is dominated by 18, 19 and 20 year-old players because they are older and stronger. Yes there are exceptions, but they are few and far between, as displayed by the research in this study. Doesn't it make sense that if a player is going to start making a real impact in his 17th or 18th year that it would be easier for the OHL to predict and draft what players will make that impact if they draft them at 16 which is only 3 months away from when they start their 17th year or 15 months away from their 18th year rather then drafting them at 15 which is 15 and 27 months away from their 17th and 18th year?

Many might not know that prior to 1990 the OHL had a 16 year-old draft. Why did the OHL go to a younger 15 year-old draft in 1990? An educated guess is the OHL switched to a lower 15 year-old draft to "get to" players in grade 10, giving the OHL the jump on the NCAA colleges who were and still are competing for the same elite players. Knowing NCAA rules prohibited the NCAA teams from initiating contact with a player or his parent at 15 meant the OHL could recruit and draft 15 year-olds before the NCAA could recruit the players and then play them in OHL games at 16 which would then bust the players eligibility to play NCAA hockey under the NCAA amateurism rules.

So why don't players wait until 17 until they go the OHL?

Given the raw numbers, why do parents allow their sons to enter into an environment as a 16 year-old underage in the OHL, which is clearly is lopsided towards failure over success? Why not wait until 17 when a player is in grade 12 and now physically and mentally mature enough to handle playing at the OHL level? Why don't players explore the other option of the NCAA as well?

The answer is two fold.

First, NCAA hockey has clearly done a poor job in explaining to 15 year-old players and parents why players should keep their NCAA/OHL options open until at least the beginning of their 17 year-old, grade 12 year. If the elite 15 year-old player and his parents are being recruited and courted by the OHL and being ignored or not informed by the NCAA, it is only natural to go where one is feeling wanted. So the NCAA has to do a better job of identifying and educating the elite players about the NCAA option when they are 15. At the very least, if the NCAA educated players and parents at 15, players would be informed and maybe put off rushing into a life decision for their 16th year.

Secondly, parents and players can be naïve, usually never having gone through this experience before. Further, parents and players vanity and pride get in the way of reality. Add in the peer pressure of hearing a friend rated highly in the OHL draft and willing to go the OHL and it's easy to see why players don't want to be left behind. It is not an accident when an OHL coach or scout comes up to a parent and player and says "you are really good, we want to draft you at 15 and you are going to be a big part of our team's future." It is hard for parents and players to keep their feet on the ground because everyone likes to be complimented.

If parents knew that the university graduation rate of OHL/CHL players was only 16% compared to 84% in the NCAA would it make them look closer at rushing into a decision?

Parents need to keep their feet on the ground, get past the compliments, and ask themselves what is best not only for their son's hockey career but also his social and emotional well-being, not to mention his continuing formal education. Parents have to do this because it is so difficult for inexperienced 15 year-old to do so.

Some final thoughts

As players are competing during their 15 year-old year they and their parents should maybe ask the following questions:

1. Why are player agents chasing after 14 and 15 year-olds when these same players can't cash an NHL paycheck until they are 18, and most of the few who do cash an NHL paycheck won't until they turn 22?
2. Why is the OHL asking you to make a commitment at 15 for your 16 year-old year, when they know the success rate of 16 year-olds in the OHL is very poor?
3. Is your son ready to leave home at 16 and enter an environment with 17-20 year-olds, away from your parental supervision, enter a new school and live with a new billet family?
4. Have you asked others who have played in the OHL/CHL at 16 who are now through the junior system to gain their insight?
5. Contrary to what any agent or scout will tell you there are no guarantees. Keeping one's opportunities open longer allows for a more mature decision.

One last thought

The Ontario Hockey League is going to be there when a player turns 17 or 18. The OHL would have preferred to have great players like Sam Gagner and Patrick Kane at 16 but the players decided to go to the OHL at 17 and 18 on their timetable. (Kane and Gagner in particular negotiated much sweeter financial deals to go to the OHL when they played elsewhere at 16 and 17 respectfully.) It could be argued that their development was enhanced by not making the jump to the OHL at 16. Going to the

OHL can be the right decision for some players, but every player who decides to go to the OHL should do it on their timetable when they are physically, emotionally and mentally ready and for most that age is 17 or 18 and not 16.

So what is the rush?

The next article will examine the educational impact of playing in the OHL and CHL compared to the NCAA.

Explanation of research spreadsheet

On the bottom left part of the spreadsheet there are two tabs.

The first tab is titled "Underage 16 study 86-89". It simply looks at the history of every player the OHL talked into playing in the OHL as a grade 11 sixteen year-old. Of the 289 players 213 have either been cut out of the league or traded.

The second tab is titled "Under 22's in the NHL". It shows all the U 22's in the NHL this year (whether they were CHL underages or not). What it really shows though is how it's almost impossible to get to the NHL before you should have your NCAA college degree.

This research is the basis for the article.