

Rushing to Somewhere Else.....All Things in Their Time

by Hal Tearse

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Where are we all going in such a hurry?

It seems that in hockey as well as life, the journey is the fruit of our endeavors. Enjoying the journey with an eye towards today is far more rewarding than continually wishing for something else or wanting to be somewhere else.

But in today's world the "grass is greener" syndrome has become an epidemic. Coaches are on the move, players are on the move, and teams are on the move. This does not apply to just the professional levels of the game. In fact, this search for something better has found it's way down into the lowest levels of our youth programs.

Mite players want to move up to squirts before they are eligible. S squirt parents want more B teams on the theory that their C level player will improve more if they play at a higher level. Parents of B level players want more A teams for the same reason. Second year Bantam players are seduced into thinking that if they move to the high school team as 9th graders that they will develop faster.

Juniors and seniors in high school are leaving home to play in the junior leagues because it is supposed to develop them faster and make them better, sooner. Open enrollment allows high school players to switch schools in search of a state championship. Some are willing to go from AA schools to A schools just to have that opportunity.

The fact that the parents and player have to sign an affidavit stating that they are transferring only for academic reasons and not for athletics is overlooked. The message it sends to kids is that anything goes in the pursuit of victory. In college players are leaving early to go professional and leaving behind the educational opportunities that they have been given.

Something is wrong with this picture. I would like to suggest that the answer goes something like this. When you are considering a move to a new level or team remember this phrase, "***They need you more than you need them***". Unless you can make an immediate undeniable impact at the next level or team you are holding weak cards in a rigged game.

It works like this. College, juniors, and professional hockey teams are a business. Their business is winning. Nothing else matters regardless of what they say. At the college and junior levels the players work for free. Scholarships are not guaranteed and junior teams can send you home or trade you to another team for financial compensation anytime they want. They can and do just that. With that premise let's look at the situation more closely.

College teams lose underclassmen to the pros sometimes as late as August each year and they need to fill a spot quickly. They will do so with a player that they might not take normally because few players are available at that late date. The next year that player may find himself playing musical lockers and not have a spot when the music stops. Sorry, we have someone better to take your spot.

In the junior leagues, your job security is even worse. With the USHL moving to Tier 1 status they now have to have 4 players under 17 years old. Although they promise lots of ice time, the early reports indicate otherwise. So much for the argument of developing faster by playing against better competition. Five to seven minutes of playing time per game on the third or fourth line seems like a bad tradeoff for 35-40 minutes of playing time including special situations on your high school team. Add to that the fun of long hours in a bus traveling to games every weekend for six months each year for at least two years and probably three. Those are long years away from home. And what about your academics, which will provide your foundation for your life after hockey?

By the way, they do allow fighting in the junior leagues and in some instances encourage it. As a 17 year old are you ready to have a bare knuckle no helmet fist fight in front of 5,000 people against a 20 year old who has three years of Junior Experience and 40 extra pounds of muscle? There is a reason those players take their teeth out before every game.

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I am a big fan of the junior leagues, having coached and been a general manager for a team many years ago. I also believe that the argument that "if it is good for the 19 and 20 year-old player it must be good for the 17 and 18 year-old player" is very misguided and ignores the evidence regarding the physical and mental development of young people.

No matter how early a player goes to juniors, he will still be the same age when he graduates. from high school and the player will face the same challenges of competing for a spot on a college team with 21 year old freshmen from junior leagues here and in other countries. That means a high school junior who leaves home to play junior hockey may have to play 3 or 4 years before he is ready for college. There are of course a few players each year where this is appropriate, but not 40-50 players each year. *All things in their time.*

High School sports are supposed to be an extension of the community and provide overall development of our young people. To often, however, we see high school coaches reach down to the 9th grade level to take bantam age players in place of juniors or seniors. What is the rationale for this type of program? This is a repeat of what the Tier 1 Junior programs are doing with the same player developmental and social problems. Would we do this in math class? Of course not. It again seems to be all about winning and for what ultimate purpose? Then add to the mix the transfer students that everybody swears were not recruited (recruiting is against high school rules) and you have a situation that does not coincide with the stated objectives of the publicly funded program. *All things in their time.*

In Minnesota we have our youth programs organized around our communities and we do have the most successful youth hockey programs in the country. Even though we cannot beat the AAA (Allstar) teams at national tournaments, we still are developing more Division one hockey players than any state in the nation. We value our community based teams and the fact that our players are friends and classmates with their teammates. Lifetime bonds are formed and friendships are made that will stand the test of time.

Let's face the facts, only about 50 players a year from Minnesota will get the chance to play college hockey at one of the 60 division one schools. That equals 200 players across the 4-year span. Those players come from high school seniors and three years of junior players. Most Division one players are spending a year in the junior leagues before going to college.

So I ask again to all the youth and high school players, what is your hurry? Enjoy the experience where you are and if you are good enough you will find the opportunities that you dream for.