

# STATE OF THE GAME

by Lyle Phair

**Over the course of the spring and summer, I have expressed my opinion in this space on why players from Michigan are not making it to the next level. And I've gotten plenty of feedback on it. It's an interesting topic and it seems like almost everyone has an opinion.**

To briefly re-cap, in May, I had made a presentation at a USA Hockey Advanced Coaches Clinic in Farmington Hills. In preparing for the clinic, I did some informal research on players making it to the next level and where they come from, my definition of the next level being Junior A, college and then professional. The results, although expected, were pretty disappointing. Without re-iterating the numbers, two things were very apparent. Outside of Michigan, nobody else thinks very highly of our players. Translation - not many Michigan players play junior or college hockey in programs outside of Michigan. Secondly, of the seventeen Michigan players competing in the NHL last season, only three of them played their youth hockey in Michigan in the past ten years. Everyone else developed prior to 1990.

Some people sluff it off as "it's a cyclical thing, we are just in a down time" explaining that the 1980's was an upswing

when Michigan produced such world-class athletes as Pat LaFontaine, Jimmy Carson, Kevin Hatcher, Darien Hatcher, Mike Modano, Doug Weight, Al Iafrate and John Vanbiesbrouck, not to mention solid NHL'ers like Kelly, Kevin and Kip Miller, Wayne Presley, Mike Donnelly, Brian Rolston, Shawn Chambers, Jim Cummins, Mike Hartman and Chris Tamer. Apparently, there must have been something in the water.

A few people think there really isn't a problem with player development, saying we are doing just fine. Others think that the old stand-by, "politics" is a factor. Michigan kids are denied opportunities, not because they are not good enough, but for some other reason, something beyond the ice surface. Many others recognize that Michigan's player development isn't what it should be, but aren't sure what could, or should, be done about it.

Since I looked at the numbers back in May, two additional significant indicators of player development have taken place, with the results only strengthening my stance. In the NHL entry draft in June, only a handful of players from Michigan were among the 250 players selected. When the Central Collegiate Hockey Association released its member schools' commitment lists of incoming freshmen,

only fourteen of eighty-two recruits came from Michigan, only nine from the metro Detroit area. This, in a conference where six of the twelve member schools are located in Michigan. The trend continues.

Let's look at the facts. Michigan leads the nation in the number of hockey players registered with USA Hockey. Michigan is the only state in the country with representation at virtually every level of the game, "division one" college hockey with six teams in the CCHA plus Wayne State in College Hockey America, "tier two" Junior A with several teams in the North American Hockey League, "major" Junior A with the Plymouth Whalers of the Ontario Hockey League, minor professional with several teams in the United Hockey League and Grand Rapids in the American Hockey League, and of course, the Detroit Red Wings in the National Hockey League. Clearly, hockey is huge. Michigan is a hotbed of hockey at every level of the game – even moreso than in some areas of Canada.

Why then, are we seeing a decline in the numbers of players from here moving on to compete at the next level? And secondly, is that even important? And finally, if it is important to correct, what can be done about it?

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In one of my previous articles, I outlined what I thought were the seven biggest problem areas that needed to be addressed to improve our player development process. Coaches need to teach skills, not systems. We need to let players make mistakes in games, sometimes even at the expense of winning. At the younger ages, we need to play fewer games and have more practices. We need to remember; it is a game for kids, it should be fun. Parents need to alter their expectations. Organizations (clubs and associations) need to adjust their priorities. Recruiting needs to be eliminated.

All of that, in a nutshell, is a polite way of saying we need to get rid of our “win at all cost attitude”. If coaches don’t win, they’re no good. They get replaced. If players don’t win, they’re no good. They get replaced.

There is absolutely no incentive whatsoever for a coach, team or organization to actually develop a player. Why waste time in practice on individual skills when you can recruit the individual players and improve their chances to win by working on team systems? And if they don’t work out, what does it matter? You can cut them the next year and go out and get someone better.

Unfortunately, I think most A, AA and AAA teams use the Red Wings as the model for building a team. Over the last few years, player development has certainly not been a priority. Obviously with the Red Wings, there is a sense of urgency to win now. Sergei Fedorov and Nick Lidstrom are getting up there in age, Steve Yzerman, Brendan Shanahan, Chris Chelios and Igor Larionov don’t have much left in the tank and Scotty Bowman is putting the finishing touches on a glorious and storied career. The window of opportunity is closing fast. In their case, it makes sense to go out and sign Brett Hull and Luc Robitaille and trade for Dominic Hasek. For the past two years they haven’t even had their own minor league affiliate to develop players. Who needs one when you can just go out and sign a free agent to fill a need? They need to win now. But at what cost? Fortunately, we won’t know for at least a few more seasons.

At the youth level, we are starting to see the cost already, the price being the declining numbers of players actually developing the skills to take them to the next level. It’s not happening.

So who is to blame?

Actually nobody. And everybody.

How can you blame a parent for trying to put their child in the best possible situation to succeed by doing whatever it takes for them to play at the highest level and with the best team they can make? How can you blame a coach who knows that the only way he is going to be able to continue to coach is to win now? How can you blame decision-makers in organizations when they know they need to have a “winning” reputation as a to attract good coaches and players?

At no other level of hockey do players have the freedom to move from team to team from year to year like they do in youth hockey. College players, in most instances, have a chance to develop over four years with their team. In junior and professional hockey, in most instances, players remain with a team for at least a few years and are given the opportunity to develop and a chance to prove themselves to the organization. The joke among minor league players who don’t make it to the NHL is that the four stages of their career are 1) prospect, 2) project, 3) suspect, and then 4) reject. At least they get a few years to go through the cycle, a chance to develop. Decisions aren’t made on them in a single year. At the youth level, the ink is sometimes barely dry on the team roster when coaches and parents are looking

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around for the “best” opportunity for next year.

I find it quite ironic that the age group that needs the most stability in terms of providing a “developmental” environment actually has the least. Imagine if teachers had the freedom to have kids “try out” to be in their class, and they could keep only those they wanted to keep. Imagine if it were feasible for parents to run their kids all over the city or state to take their kid where the best teacher and the best school is. (Actually they can do that but it is pretty costly and time-consuming to move). Although not perfect, the analogy works. It works because we are talking about kids and their growth and development, both physically and intellectually. Many of life’s lessons are taught outside of the school classroom, and sports in general, offers a great place to learn. What kind of messages are kids learning in the travel hockey environment today?

Some people think the system is great. Competition is good. It makes you better. I couldn’t agree more, if the competition was only on the ice and only among the kids. As it stands now, the competing is done by the parents, to see how many A’s come after their kid’s team name, as if that somehow elevates their status in society.

The competition is also among the coaches to see who can attract, acquire, or coerce the best players to play for their team? In many instances, the game is over before the kids even hit the ice.

But is all of this really important? It’s a game played by kids for fun. Is it necessary that we develop players to compete at the higher levels? It’s an interesting question. It is certainly not the MOST important thing. But it is something to consider. Junior, college and professional players have to come from somewhere. It might as well be here, as anywhere else. As long as we don’t lose sight of the most important thing, it’s a game played by kids for FUN. If some make it to the next level that is great. If they don’t, that’s fine too. That being said, an important aspect of a good program is to teach the kids to be the best that they can be, to develop them.

And that’s where I think we, in Michigan, really fail. We don’t develop kids to be the best that we can be. Instead, we teach them to do whatever it takes to win. And I said before, there really is nobody to blame, yet everybody is to blame. It isn’t the people, really. It is the system. The people just cycle through the system, looking to do, and thinking they are doing what is best for them. Usually, it isn’t

until they are finished that they look back and wish they had gotten more out of it.

So what exactly is the system? It is the structure that is in place at the various levels of the game. And for the most part it is excellent.

Contrary to what many people would like to believe, USA Hockey does an outstanding job with huge organization with varying interests in different parts of the country. The messages that they send to their members and their parents are right on the money. Fair play, sportsmanship, fun, safety, friendship, teamwork, all the right things. If you read their publication, American Hockey, and have read their brochures and literature, you know what I mean.

The Michigan Amateur Hockey Association does an excellent job. An argument could be made that they are “leaders” nationally with their pioneering efforts in the Coaching Education Program and requirements, and most recently, the STAR Parental Awareness Program. But there is one area that they come up a little short. It is time for them to take a strong position regarding A, AA and AAA hockey at the youth level, the areas of the game where players, if they do happen to be moving up to the next level, would most

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likely be developed. It's gotten out of control.

I don't know the exact numbers, but I would guesstimate that A, AA and AAA players probably make up less than 10% of the players registered with MAHA, the remainder being B level players and adults. And I would be willing to bet that of the time MAHA spends on disciplinary matters, suspensions and general problems, a good deal more than 10% of it is directly attributable to the "travel" hockey community. Probably more than 50%. I would also bet that the idea of the STAR program was conceived to help deal with many of the problems and challenges that arise for MAHA with travel hockey.

It seems to me that "B" or "house" hockey, although it has some problems, can't even come close to the number encountered at the "travel" level. Oddly enough at the B level, teams are formed by draft and the process is very strictly controlled by MAHA rules. Plenty of control, minimal problems. Even with the majority of the registrants playing at that level.

Travel hockey has limited restrictions on where players come from. At the A and AA levels, a team is allowed players from anywhere within its district, and three players from out of district. At the AAA

level, there are no restrictions. There exists minimal control, plenty of problems and limited development of players. Sounds like a tough combination.

So what can be done? Oftentimes, more rules mean more problems as people try to find more ways to break them. But in this case, I think some simple changes could have some great results. Here are my thoughts for a system that balances fun, competition (for the players), and player development.

- 1) Change the "B" level to "A" so those players and parents don't feel like second-class citizens. How often have you heard a parent say "oh yeah, my son, he just plays house", as though there is something wrong with that? These teams would still be formed by a draft. Only the letter designation would change.
- 2) Mini Mites play cross-ice games only so that more kids can be on the ice at a time having fun, while developing their skating and puck skills. They can't comprehend the rules of the game anyway. Limit their games and practices and establish a proper ratio, three practices to one game.
- 3) Only allow the A level for Mites. No tryouts, teams formed by draft only. Limit their games and practices and establish a proper ratio, two practices to one game.. Plenty of time on fun and skills at this level.
- 4) Take what is now A and AA and combine it to call it AA. This would be the "representative" level of play, meaning kids who were members of a particular association would all be able to try out for that team. Players could not be taken from other associations. This would encourage associations to develop players and coaches at the A level so they could progress to represent them at the AA level. As part of this move, there would no longer be the "one calendar year team", meaning 11 and 12 year olds would play together, no separate teams. Teams would be required to take a certain amount of first year players. This would give players the chance to be a first year player and compete against older players to learn what it takes to improve, no different than college freshmen in most cases are not the stars playing with and against older players. But they benefit and learn

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from playing against older players one year, then the next year can refine their skills and confidence by being the “experienced” ones.

Larger associations could have two AA teams to represent them, while smaller ones could possibly combine with another smaller association for the AA level.

- 5) AAA teams would become “regional” representative teams and would work in conjunction with area associations. Each AAA organization would have three or four (maybe more depending on size) associations where they could draw their players from. Only players from the associations could try out for the AAA rep team. Again, this would encourage the development of players, not stealing and recruiting. And again, teams would be formed of two years of players (ie 11 and 12), not one, with a minimum number of first year players. AAA teams would hold tryouts first, then AA, and then A players would be rated for the draft. Or better yet, associations could have all players of their players in an age group evaluated and rated together at one time. The fifteen highest rated

players would play on the AA (rep) team, and the remainder would be drafted for the A level.

A perfect system? Far from it. Better than what we have? Probably, but certainly not without revisions. Obviously independent teams would have to be dealt with for one, as well as problems with differing sizes of associations, and the issue of not shutting out players from the opportunity to compete at the higher levels. But those same issues are taken into consideration now in the current system. There is no system that is going to appease everyone. So if we want it to, it, or some form of it would work. But it has to come from MAHA, the only constant from year to year. The players and parents will cycle through as they always do, doing what they think is best, hoping to make it to the next level. But they're not. And when they don't, they blame the system. What 's it going to take to make a change?