

Tucker Hockey Initiatives

Growing the Game in Canada

The Hockey Zones Winter 2012 edition published an article called “The Minor Hockey Dilemma”. This commentary revealed that the state of Canadian minor hockey as we know it today may look quite different in the next decade or so. Hockey Canada’s membership is around 575,000 registered players, down more than 200,000 from its peak. The myth is that most Canadian boys play hockey, however, the reality is that the numbers are falling. Only 15.7%, or 1 in 6.4 boys, actually play the game in Canada. If the trend of young males deciding not to play hockey continues, the numbers are expected to lower to about 360,000 in 2021. On the opposite side, there’s been a boom in female hockey, but the numbers do not make up for the decline in male participation. That trend could have a serious impact on Canada’s international male dominance of the sport in the future.

For many Canadians, hockey is more than a game; it is a big part of life. No other country is as passionate about hockey! Everyone has an opinion about the game. So it’s very difficult for administrators to make progressive changes to the hockey system in Canada because hockey is such a big deal and everyone wants to discuss and debate it.

As a continuation to our previous article, we offer our two cents worth to grow the game in Canada with a 10 point action plan for the betterment of the game.

Reduce Financial Barriers to Entry

- Since the majority of lower class, lower middle class, and single income families typically can not afford to have their children play hockey, the governing bodies must find ways of lowering the costs of individual player registrations and hockey equipment.
- In towns and cities across the country more subsidized or provided at a nominal fee “Learn to Skate” programs and “Introduction to Hockey” programs need to be offered to capture more family’s interest and participation.

- More initiatives like the Comrie’s Sports Equipment Bank, recently launched in Calgary, need to be created across the country. The Equipment Bank is a not – for – profit organization. Russell Gillespie, the General Manager of the Calgary program states “We are trying to breakdown financial barriers between kids and their chosen sport”. “We encourage anyone...to get in contract with us to help as many kids as possible... help them play.” For additional information visit www.comriessportsequipmentbank.org

Address Visible Minorities and Changing Demographics

- Canadian families are having fewer children. According to recent Health Canada information, the Canadian fertility rate is 1.5 children per woman aged 15 to 49 which is well below the replacement rate of 2.1. This is considered among the lowest birth rates in the world.
- We are living in an ever changing society where other sports, digital gadgets, youthful pressures from schools and part – time jobs take precedence over the game of hockey. With respect to other sports more and more children have been gravitating to sports such as soccer where the participation costs for registration, travel and equipment are significantly lower than those for hockey.
- Declining interest from a changing population. Low birth rates in Canada are being offset by a steady flow of immigration from non-hockey playing countries. Statistics Canada data from 2006 states that among recent arrivals of immigrants, only 32% of their children participate in organized sports compared to 55% of those of Canadian born parents. Canada will have up to 14.4 million persons belonging to a visible minority group by 2031, more than double the 5.3 million reported in 2006. The rest of the population, in contrast, is expected to increase by less than 12 %. Today, in Toronto over 40% of the population consists of immigrants; in Calgary that number is nearly 30 %.

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“Everyone here has the sense that right now is one of those moments when we are influencing the future.”

~ Steve Jobs

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- Conversely, second generation Canadians are far more willing to put their kids in hockey because even though they may not have played the game they have been surrounded by it most of their lives. Parents who have participated in hockey take a more hands on approach with their kids because they can relate to it and both child and parent share in the enjoyment of the game. Attracting immigrants to the game is a core component to keeping the registration numbers up. Minor hockey ads showing ethnic kids and their role models to promote the game and having fun is a key requirement.
- Our governing hockey bodies need to produce educational and promotional materials in different languages and put on more hockey seminars to educate people, especially parents, about the game. Hockey Canada has looked at technology to translate its promotional literature into 17 different languages. It's a critical task.
- Minor hockey is dying in many small Canadian communities. As more and more families leave small towns to pursue job opportunities in urban centres, the population continues to decline and the numbers of kids playing hockey is getting lower and lower. This requires amalgamation of rural associations to ice a complete team or teams which results in extended travel and extra associated costs. These costs need to be subsidized.

Subsidizing Hockey from All Levels of Governments

- All levels of government must support subsidizing hockey and

sports in general. Governments see the value of keeping kids active. There's a linkage between activity and health care. All levels of government need to step up and work together (team work) to lower costs and make playing hockey more affordable to enable kids to be more active. Lower ice costs to the individual minor hockey associations can be directly passed on to individual participants via reduced registration fees each year.

- This is the philosophy of the Swedish government where it only cost \$1,000 to play hockey from August 1st to June 30th. All kids, rich or poor, are given an opportunity to excel to the highest level.

Changing the Minor Hockey Coaching Mind Set

- Players must get the right start. The little people's first adventure to the rink must be a positive experience and a place they want to visit every day. A sanctuary of sorts!
- The toughest part of playing hockey is that you have to learn to skate before you can begin to master the other skills of the game. Other sports such as soccer do not require a person to master balancing on thin metal blades before learning to kick. It's a more challenging sport to learn than first meets the eye. As well, parents that don't know how to skate are less inclined to enrol their kids in hockey, as they cannot participate in their kids' development directly.
- More time, monies and resources are needed to improve minor hockey coach education and mentoring. Properly motivated coaches are needed at the lower

levels of hockey. If we have more "value based" coaches at the lower levels, to instil a love of the game and teach "fundamental" skating and hockey skills. It will help kids enjoy their hockey experience better and should keep them playing longer.

- At the lower levels of minor hockey sometimes coaches deliver the wrong message – winning over having fun (getting too serious at too early an age). Let's keep the fun in the game!
- Address the "Shortening of the Bench" problem within minor hockey. It's doing a lot of damage to our game. Read Wally Kozak's column on page 6 of our newsletter for an informative insight into this problem.

Changing the Minor Hockey Season Model

- Recruitment and retention are the key words for the governing bodies – it's about selling our great game to the public especially visible minorities to make it more appealing.
- Parents need the choice available to have their children participate in CONTACT or NON - CONTACT hockey. More time and monies need to be directed to SAFETY FIRST and checking clinics / resources to prepare the players for contact hockey. Players participating at a level below AA, such as house / less competitive leagues do not need to be playing contact hockey. At this level, the sport is more recreational than competitive in nature.
- Now, more and more Canadians share concerns about body checks, concussions and head

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injuries. The Canada Safety Council has been speaking out on this for more than 20 years. More progressive concussion studies and changes need to be implemented to make hockey safer and less of a violent sport. The main reason kids play any sport is for fun – and getting hurt is no fun! Fear of injuries is driving young players and their parents from the game.

- Take fighting completely out of the game at all levels of hockey. Increased violence has turned kids especially those new to Canada, from the game of hockey. Also, racist and derogatory comments on the ice and in the arenas have contributed to an unwelcoming environment. In addition, in today's world publicized incidents of racism in hockey have become more frequent and in turn have raised concerns among families in the minority communities.

Improve on the Hockey Governing Pyramid

- One of the biggest challenges for Hockey Canada is dealing with the pyramid of provincial bodies and the hundreds of minor hockey associations beneath the organization. There are 4 layers to the Minor Hockey pyramid, for example in Calgary: Hockey Canada, then

Hockey Alberta, then Hockey Calgary, and then the 20 + local Calgary community minor hockey associations. Each organization has its own agenda and directives, and they don't always mesh with the level of the pyramid above or below them. In the past Hockey Canada's directives on change and improvement have not always been embraced and implemented for the betterment of the game at the grassroots levels. Such an example was the issue of checking at the Pee wee level which took decades for everyone to agree upon. Ridding the system of unnecessary bureaucracy / politics will be a major challenge indeed. Teamwork is a necessity for the betterment of the game!

- The Canadian Junior Hockey League (WHL, OHL and QMJHL) and ultimately the National Hockey League prosper from the efforts of the many minor hockey systems. Since the local minor hockey systems are feeder systems, a stronger partnership and financial commitment to give back to grass roots hockey is needed in the years ahead from both leagues.
- A more conscious effort should be made to actively seek out and appoint visible minorities to staff hockey related positions in community. More minority

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representatives in the minor hockey organizations will help ensure the effectiveness of the governing bodies' philosophies, policies, programs and services.

- Establishing advisory boards, independent consulting committees or special task forces to address the major hockey issues, recommend solutions and future courses of action. It's important to keep the hockey establishment accountable in the decades ahead.

Improving on the Public's Attitudes and Perceptions

- As previously mentioned, the perception of hockey as an increasingly violent sport in the public's eye is a deepening problem. Hockey is portrayed as a violent sport based primarily on the body contact aspect and related injuries. With an increase to player concussions and enhanced 24 hour sports coverage it only magnifies the violent perception and issue within our game.
- Governing hockey bodies, at all levels, have to do a lot more to ensure the game grows with a special emphasis on making the game safer especially at the lower levels and educating parents on the benefits of proper protective equipment when worn properly such as properly securing the chin strap on helmets in warm ups and games. Also, a zero tolerance for head shots and for fighting at all levels will enhance the safety and overall perception of the game in the long run.

Increase Corporate Involvement / Sponsorships

- More Canadian corporations need to step up and create sponsorship programs to help grow the game, such as subsidizing and funding registrations and equipment for players, as well as help with building more recreational facilities. More initiatives like Comrie's Sports Equipment Bank need to be created across Canada to provide all kids with the opportunity to play.

Improve on Family Tax Credits

- The federal government needs to enhance the tax credit system for participating in sports especially hockey to encourage and reward increased participation for kids and adults. As mentioned earlier, with both kids and adults more active in our society, it will create better health, fitness and overall wellness and reduce billions of dollars on our health care systems in the decades ahead.

Create a Hockey Legacy Fund / Command Centre

- Canada is a world leader with over 2,600 arenas nation wide. We are truly blessed to have so many facilities. Calgary alone has over 60 arenas. However, many arenas across the country are getting old and badly need capital improvements. A national capital expenditure program to help old arena upgrades and build new arenas where the demand warrants is an important component to our future hockey infrastructure.
- Creation of a 1 – 800 hockey call centre to accommodate and assist individuals and minor hockey associations across the country that need help to keep playing or hockey going in their area.

In Summary:

This article just scratches the ice surface. It's Tucker Hockey's way of expressing our views for the betterment of the game. A very detailed and systemic investigation by the governing bodies concerning the issues confronting minor hockey is necessary to change direction, and to strengthen the future welfare and betterment of hockey in Canada. One of Hockey Canada's mandates is to increase hockey participation in the years ahead. This will require "thinking and stepping outside the box". Back in July of 2014, Hockey Canada named Tom Renney the organization's new President and Chief Executive Officer. Tom is definitely the right man for the job! Under his vision and leadership, Hockey Canada will be taken to another level. If there's anyone in our country that has the diversified hockey background, respect at all levels, a strong core value base, dynamic people skills and forward / innovative thinking... it's Tom Renney. Tom, my personal belief is that all children should have the opportunity to play organized hockey – the nation's greatest sport. Sincere best wishes with your future Hockey Canada endeavours!

Now tell us your views on how we can improve the numbers?

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