

OPINION

Canada led the world in producing hockey players. But the game changed, and we didn't keep up



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A general view of the draft board after round one of the 2023 Upper Deck NHL Draft at Bridgestone Arena on June 28, 2023 in Nashville, Tenn.

BRIJCF RFNNFTT/GFTTY IMAGES

To mould some of the ancient world's most feared warriors, the Spartans took boys away from the families at an early age and sent them to communal training academies known as *agoge*. These offered years of tough learning in preparation for a future at war, where extreme hardness of body and spirit was essential.

It's a story that could also describe Canada's Spartan hockey academies, which were once the only path to a job playing in the National Hockey League.

In 1969, every player selected in the first round of the NHL entry draft was Canadian, and from the predecessors to the Canadian Hockey League's three major-junior leagues – the Western Hockey League, the Ontario Hockey League and the Quebec Maritimes Junior Hockey League.

They were like the Big Three auto makers of yore, holding a near-monopoly because they offered the features most prized by the customers. The customers for Canadian junior hockey were NHL teams.

NHL hockey, and the Canadian leagues preparing kids for it, were much harsher ecosystems than those of American basketball, baseball and football. The semi-lawlessness of the NHL ice surface necessitated a certain kind of player, and developing him necessitated a certain kind of training.

Canadians have long held that our society is more peaceful, law abiding, safer and fairer than that of the United States. It's a belief founded in truth. But one place where it was never true was in our national sport.

A Canadian boy who wanted to make the NHL had to become extremely tough, and the less talented one was, the more physically and especially psychologically hardened he had to become.

Hockey of the old school was something close to Thomas Hobbes's state of nature: a war of all against all, where life was "nasty, brutish and short." There was a rule book, but like international law, it was only marginally respected or enforced. The referee's job was not to protect the weak.

The sooner an aspiring Canadian player learned that, the greater his chance of survival.

In contrast, American college hockey, offering a pleasant life on a university campus, was not designed to produce such young men. Which is why, until well in the NHL expansion era, almost none made it to the NHL. And Europeans? Sure they could skate, but "chicken Swedes" were believed to be lacking in the less fine aspects of the game.

The CHL, in contrast, produced the kind of young man who could survive and thrive in the NHL, while weeding out those who failed to display the requisite

physical and especially mental attributes, the latter of which included obedience and laconic stoicism.

You had to accept being drafted by a team hundreds of kilometres away; you had to go along with being separated from your family years before you were old enough to drink; you had to relish becoming the underpaid property of a small-town business; you had to suck it up when you were traded to another town hundreds of kilometres away; you had to accept all kinds of bizarre hazing; you could not question the coach; and you could not flinch from a bare-knuckle brawl in front of thousands of fans, despite being just a kid.

Globe and Mail sportswriter Dick Beddoes once asked Bobby Clarke about the slash that broke Valeri Kharlamov's ankle in the 1972 Canada-Soviet series. He replied that if he hadn't learned to lay on the lumber once in while, he'd never have made it out of Flin Flon.

It was true, literally and metaphorically. A kid of medium height and build, and a diabetic to boot, he did what had to be done to punch his ticket from the lunar isolation of northern Manitoba to the bright lights of the NHL.

But the NHL, and hockey, are not what they used to be.

In the first round of the 2023 NHL draft, only one-third of the players selected were Canadians. The No. 1 pick, Connor Bedard, went the traditional route, playing in the WHL. But the second-highest Canadian pick, Adam Fantilli, chose to play junior in the amateur United States Hockey League, followed by a year at the University of Michigan. More and more players are choosing similar routes.

"Choice" was not a word in Canada's this-is-Sparta hockey vocabulary. But most players drafted by the NHL now come from non-traditional sources: European leagues, Canadian junior leagues below the CHL, and above all, the USHL and NCAA.

According to a [recent analysis](#) by The Athletic, when it comes to producing NHL players, the USHL has pulled ahead of each of the three CHL leagues.

The customer – the NHL – isn't who he used to be. The league is now run by Americans, for Americans. When we talk about The Code, they don't know what we're on about. They're got less time than ever for our ancient and often self-contradictory [notions of honour](#) and vigilante violence. The American-run

NHL has year by year moved to rules that celebrate skilled players, and render unemployable the less skilled.

The CHL has changed, too, but other leagues, mostly outside of Canada, are showing themselves to be increasingly successful at producing what the business of today's NHL wants: more silky mitts; fewer cement hands and heads.

There's a lot of talk these days about the supposedly broken culture of Canadian hockey. Some of it is miles off base. If you think your 10 year old shouldn't play hockey because it will turn him to a misanthropic misogynist, give your head a shake. But some other criticisms are more on point. At the top levels of Canadian hockey, a fair bit of cement-head outlook remains.

And for that, hate the game, not the players. They don't make the rules. They don't run the *agoge*. They are its product.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/commentary/article-canada-led-the-world-in-producing-hockey-players-but-the-game-changed/>

I believe it was the case that being a soldier in ancient times—even in places and measures now—meant you could enjoy both “license to kill” and, if you were clever, ferocious, and (as necessary) devious enough to survive, license to rape and pillage “the spoils of war.” This was your primary reward and recompense. Is not our “celebrity culture” for athletes, beginning with junior hockey players, in accordance with this? Bobby Hull. 2018 Team Canada.



What do you think the NHL chances were for this neophyte who dreamed of it? The desire may have been there, and maybe the talent if bone and muscle had been exceptional, but alas, they weren't. I think he was lucky. He wasn't that tough or malleable: even “Jason Bourne” wasn't. If he had succeeded in the hockey wars working his way through the ranks, I fear he would have been like his father would have been had he been assigned combat duty in WWII. TJB

Militaries have always had trouble finding enough men who can actually kill another man, especially face to face, “him or me. He who hesitates is dead.” My father was a truck driver in Artillery; he would have struggled to kill another man; and if he had, and then come home, he would have been one more deeply-troubled returning veteran. The Army had already taught him how to drink hard. His son would have done the same thrown into battle in the elite hockey wars. Sometimes prayers are best answered “No.”