

OPINION

There's a growing disconnect between hockey and Canadian families



GARY MASON > NATIONAL AFFAIRS COLUMNIST
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When I was a boy growing up in southwestern Ontario, there wasn't a kid I knew who didn't play minor hockey.

Most winters, we had backyard rinks. We were obsessed with the game and aspired to make the big leagues. By the time I had kids of my own, I lived on the West Coast, where hockey perhaps wasn't as ingrained in the local culture as it was in Ontario, but was popular nonetheless.

My youngest son started playing hockey when he was six. By the time he was eight, he had decided he wanted to be a goalie. Before that season was wrapped up, he would have his own goalie pads, glove, blocker and mask – and my wife and I were \$1,400 poorer for it.

We had no idea what we were getting into.

My son became an elite goaltender. He made the top minor hockey teams and got recruited to play for exclusive spring teams. We travelled to tournaments around North America. Every few years Geoff needed new equipment. We paid for goalie instruction. While we had zero illusions he would one day play in the

NHL, we never thought of saying we couldn't afford anything – that's what second and third mortgages are for.

By the time Geoff was 17, he had had enough. He wanted to pursue his love of music. We couldn't have been happier.

One day, my wife and I sat down and went over the spreadsheets we had kept of the money we had spent on both sons. (Our oldest boy was a top-ranked junior golfer who travelled all over the world playing competitively.) For Geoff, we factored in all the various plane tickets and weeks in hotels and car rentals. We calculated gas costs and equipment costs and registration costs from the time he was six years old until he was done playing at 17. The total for Geoff alone was more than \$130,000. Our golfer son's costs were well in excess of that.

Now granted, not all parents who have their kids in hockey will have the expenses we incurred. But even leaving out the spring hockey teams, the price tag today is wildly obscene for many. In our case, we're talking about a period from 1995 to 2006 – which is to say, an epoch not nearly as challenging for parents, cost-wise, as the one we're in now.

Therefore, it was little surprise to read recently that registration for minor hockey in Canada is in serious decline. According to [a report by the Associated Press](#), in 2021, Hockey Canada reported 411,818 youths under 18 participating in the sport, which represented a 22-per-cent decline from 13 years earlier, when more than a half-million kids (523,785) were registered to play.

The number-one reason given by most people for not getting their children into hockey (in Canada at least) is cost. As mentioned, everything today for families is more expensive. But the fact is, hockey became an elitist sport years ago. It's just more so now.

Some people believe this is just a temporary blip, part of the regular ebb and flow of the sport. I'm not buying it. The fewer kids you have playing the game, the fewer people you have connected to the NHL teams and their star players who inspire so many kids to play. Absent that synergy, you also have fewer people watching the Stanley Cup finals, even when there is a Canadian team in the series, [as my colleague Cathal Kelly recently highlighted](#).

Soccer seems to be a more popular choice than hockey for kids – and parents. It is definitively the more economical route to go. But soccer also has a cool factor that hockey can't compete with. Its players are more popular than NHL stars. Soccer is also a sport in which a child is less likely to get seriously injured when compared to hockey.

Hockey has also been hurt by bad, and I mean truly ugly, publicity. Stories of hazing rituals and [sexual misconduct around junior hockey teams](#) have become commonplace. These stories have always been in the background, but are now attracting far more public attention. Who wants their child associated with that?

The NHL is no longer the domain of Canadian-born players, either. It's become a global game, with players named Tarasenko and Barkov and Luostarinen suiting up each night. It means the competition to reach the top level is more intense, more out-of-reach for most kids in this country.

All of it adds up to trouble for our national game. More and more kids – and their parents – are deciding hockey isn't for them. The question is: does anyone care?

https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-theres-a-growing-disconnect-between-hockey-and-canadian-families/?intcmp=gift_subscribed

A friend of mine devoted to amateur baseball, and hockey, hates soccer. Beyond “all that pathetic diving—what does that teach kids?”—he sees token commitment to athletics in six weeks of spring soccer before parents head to the lake to lounge away the summer. Once, prairie summers were baseball and fastball ‘sports day’ tournaments bringing people together all summer long.

The cynic in me suspects the die-hard hockey parents out there like this: Less players means more chance our boy can get an NCAP scholarship or make it pro, either ink that multimillion dollar contract or bring a beauty back after a short career in Europe. Canadians are even playing pro hockey in China now.

One less thing to bring us together as a nation. Even with past criticism of the hockey culture in Canada, I still saw men who had never played as boys missing out on sharing something in common with the majority of other males. I scarcely need to focus on NHL hockey anymore; I seem to simply absorb it with mild interest and still keep up with those who follow hockey seriously. The sport as a cultural phenomenon has also added interest. And, when Connor McDavid dipsy-doodles and plays with men like he did in PeeWee with boys, I instinctively have all sorts of muscle memories and fantasies kick in. To pick up a stick, or baseball bat, is to automatically switch into this mode. TJB