



Unintended Consequences The Changing Landscape of Hockey in Minnesota

There is growing concern about changes occurring in the Minnesota hockey world in regards to player movement from team to team and level to level. A recent article in the Minneapolis Star/Tribune highlighted some of the challenges facing college teams as they lose players to the professional ranks well before the players have completed their college eligibility. Naturally that has trickled down to the high school level as some players are graduating from high school in three years so that they can move on to college a year early, ninth grade players leaving Bantams for high school and players leaving Minnesota high schools for the junior hockey leagues. These trends can all be traced back to the rule changes or program enhancements that have been enacted by the NHL, USHL, Minnesota State High School League, USA Hockey and Minnesota Hockey. In most cases what we are seeing is the unintended consequences of decisions made for other purposes. The ironic part is some decisions were made to restrict the movement of players, some to offer competitive alternatives that have actually had the opposite effect, and some do offer better programs.

The NHL has a new collective bargaining agreement with players that lowers the age of free agency from 31 to 27. Since that is when the players get their big money contracts they and their agents want to get them into the league earlier. Additionally the teams can sign rookie players for much less money than under the previous contract so they are taking younger players and using the American Hockey League as a development league. The result is more players leaving college early to start their professional careers.

USA Hockey, in their desire to compete at the international level, built a training program in Ann Arbor Michigan 11 years ago to train and develop the top fifty prospects from all over the country. The NTDP has been a big success with the USA teams representing our country very well in recent years. Each year however, several top players from Minnesota High School ranks leave home to play in Ann Arbor. Given the chance most players would jump at the opportunity.

The USHL (United States Hockey League) decided to take on Tier 1 status and in that process decided to be a viable option for high school age players. The long schedule and high level of play attracts the top end high school players who aspire to play Division 1 college hockey. Many Division 1 college coaches encourage their future players to go to the USHL to develop into college level players.

The MNSHL (Minnesota State High School League) recently enacted a rule requiring transfer students to sit out a year of athletics if they change schools after they have started 9th grade. This rule makes some sense and is aimed at programs that recruited elite level players in the junior and senior years. Clearly there was a need for this action as the top players were moving to just a few schools. The outcome has yet to be seen but early indications is that it will hurt the high profile schools that have recruited top hockey players. The rule does restrict these players and gives them only one other option to high school hockey and that is to move on to junior hockey. Additionally it is interesting to note that over one hundred 9th grade boys are rostered on high school teams this year even though they still have bantam eligibility remaining. In fact there are a couple high school coaches that are trying to persuade the local youth program to drop their bantam programs so the players can play in the high school system as eighth and ninth graders.

The Upper Midwest Elite League with initial support from Minnesota Hockey has developed a top quality pre season program for high school players in Minnesota, Wisconsin and North Dakota. It is aimed at the top 100 players in the mid west and is a show case event every weekend each fall in several venues. Originally created to offer more games and a higher level of competition to retain high school players that would otherwise have left for the USHL or NAHL, the results have been mixed. As a weekend showcase program it allows college and junior coaches to easily see the players in convenient locations in the fall. The downside is that the high visibility to junior scouts makes it easier for them to encourage players to leave their high school early and go to the junior leagues, sometimes before the Elite league schedule is even completed.

As with most other parts of our lives, we are all faced with far many more choices than in the past. Hockey has become a viable business with the success of the junior leagues and other programs that offer high end players opportunities. The reality is that this trend will not change and may even accelerate. Options and choices are a good thing even at the expense of one program over the other. Organizations and programs that fail to recognize this changing environment and respond to those changes will eventually become irrelevant and a new model will emerge through other avenues.

Stay tuned for the ever changing dynamics of hockey in Minnesota.

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