

Navigating The Junior Hockey Landscape

Asking The Right Questions Can Provide The Right Directions Up The Ladder Of Development

By:

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The Junior hockey landscape in the United States stretches from Alaska to Florida and includes more than 200 teams spread across a dozen leagues. And it's not always an easy landscape to navigate.

USA Hockey Magazine posed the top 10 questions about Junior hockey to a panel of experts—USA Hockey director of Junior hockey Marc Boxer; Vice President, Junior Council John Vanbiesbrouck; USHL Commissioner Bob Fallen; and NAHL director of communications Alex Kyrias.

Here is some advice they offered to help every player take the next step up the ladder of development:

What are the levels of Junior hockey?

USA Hockey sanctions three tiers of Junior hockey. The United States Hockey League plays at the Tier I level, and the North American Hockey League competes at the Tier II level. The Tier III level consists of the Eastern Hockey League, the Metropolitan Junior Hockey League, NA3EHL

Independents, the NA3HL, Northern-Pacific, Rocky Mountain and U.S. Premier. Tier I and Tier II rosters are limited to 23 players per team, and Tier III teams carry 25 players.

What is the difference in costs for the three tiers?

Teams at the Tier I level pay for all costs involved with playing, including equipment and housing. Players in the NAHL pay for housing and some equipment. Tier III is pay-to-play and costs for billeting, ice time and coaching vary depending on location of the franchise.

What questions should I ask before deciding which tryouts I should attend?

There are fees involved with participating in tryouts, so players and parents should do their homework before deciding where to try out.

They should ask other questions as well: How many veterans will be returning? How many roster spots are available? Where do players go after they 'graduate' from the program?

There is also a big difference between a recruiting pitch in April and how things might play out during training camp in September. Similar questions should be asked before signing to play for a program.

When is the right time to play Junior hockey?

This is more of a family decision because the majority of Junior hockey players must move away from home to play. Again, players must ask a variety of questions before making a decision.

Is the player mature enough to handle the responsibilities of living away from home and handling the hockey, social and academic elements of Junior hockey? What are the player's goals, and how realistic are those goals?

Keep in mind, on average there are 225 college scholarships available each year, and Canadian and European players are also vying for them, so competition is fierce.



The

current landscape of Junior hockey in the United States provides talented players with opportunities to improve their skills along with their chances of advancing in their hockey careers.

Do I have to play Junior hockey at an early age to advance my career?

It's not a bad thing to stay home and play high school hockey or Midget hockey if you're not quite ready to handle all that goes along with Junior hockey. Teenagers develop as players and people at different rates. There are advantages to excelling at the high school or Midget level for an extra year before moving on to play Junior hockey.

Where does education fit into the life of a Junior hockey player?

Because Junior hockey is considered a gateway to college hockey, teams at all levels should be placing emphasis on the educational component. That's why they develop relationships with high

schools, community colleges and four-year institutions to make sure their players have educational options.

Even though Junior teams are not directly affiliated with a school, there are often consequences for failing to meet academic requirements. Coaches will take away ice time for missed assignments or grades that do not meet the standards they establish at the beginning of the season.

Most USHL teams employ academic advisors to make sure their high school or college players maintain their academic standings and to help them prepare for college entrance exams and understand what to look for in a post-high school institution. This varies by team and should be considered when considering your options.

Aside from playing hockey, what can a player expect from the Junior hockey experience?

The hockey component actually makes up a small percentage of a player's day, so teams seek opportunities for players to develop away from the rink as well. Off-ice training is required of all players. Most teams require their players to attend high school or community college, hold a part-time job or participate in the team's community outreach programs.

Players who move away from home to play Tier I and Tier II Junior hockey are assigned to billet families, who are screened by the teams to make sure they provide a stable environment. Players competing at the Tier III level who are under the age of 18 are required to live with a billet family. While living in billet homes, players are subjected to the same house rules as other teenagers.

What do I need to be aware of when it comes to drafts or signing tenders with a team?

Drafts are league-specific events that determine teams' rights to players who wish to play in that league.

The USHL and NAHL give their teams the option of signing a limited number of players to tenders before the draft, and those teams forfeit draft picks in lieu of the tenders. A tender is an agreement to play for a team, and it eliminates your other options within that league.

The majority of Tier III teams use contracts, which are different from tenders. Contracts for the following season may not be signed before the end of USA Hockey's National Tournament series. A

contract binds you to one specific team and prevents you from moving to a different team or league, unless your rights are either released or traded.

How will participating in showcase events help me get recognized by Junior programs?

There are a variety of pre-draft combines and showcase events that promise exposure to Junior and college programs. This is another area in which you should do your homework. Ask those teams if they plan to attend and how often they find players at these events.

Where is a good place to start 'doing my homework' on Junior hockey?

You can glean quite a bit of information by visiting USAHockey.com/juniorhockey, which includes a directory of leagues and teams as well as other helpful information. You can get a feel for the talent level for most teams by watching their games on FASTHockey.com. Perhaps the best advice comes from parents and players who have experienced Junior hockey and are willing to share what they've learned along the way.

Fans in the Stands (Attendance for 2014-15 season)

United States Hockey League

Total attendance – 1,384,820 fans

Games – 510

Average attendance – 2,715

Top Draws:

- Sioux Falls Stampede (191,280)
- Fargo Force (106,299)
- Green Bay Gamblers (102,485)

North American Hockey League

Total attendance – 1,012,204 fans

Games – 720

Average attendance – 1,405

Top Draws:

- Corpus Christi IceRays (94,890)
- Wenatchee Wild (88,240)
- Amarillo Bulls (73,989)

Eastern Hockey League

Total attendance – 42,780

Games – 418

Average attendance – 102

Top Draws:

- Philadelphia Little Flyers (8,932)
- Boston Junior Rangers (6,325)
- Connecticut Oilers (3,665)