

College Hockey Has a Talent Glut, but Nowhere to Grow

By: GARY SANTANIELLO MARCH 23, 2017



Never has the United States produced more N.C.A.A. Division I-ready college hockey players. Never have more Europeans come to the States to play college hockey. Hundreds of Canadians choose to continue their careers at American universities. While that has been a boon for the sport, Division I men's college hockey has become a game of musical chairs in which the number of players has increased but the number of chairs has not. "There are more Division I-quality players than lockers available," said Air Force's longtime coach, Frank Serratore.

The number of Division I men's lacrosse programs has increased to 69 from 54 since 2003, and Football Bowl Subdivision teams have gone to 127 from 117. Even basketball has grown by 20 to 346 programs. But men's hockey has not had a net gain in that same span.

Even with the high-profile additions of Penn State and Arizona State in the past five years, hockey remains stuck at 60 Division I teams. With 18 full scholarships, available and around 24 players per team, there are roughly 1,450 spots to be had. And it appears unlikely that any change is imminent. "There isn't the growth in college hockey we'd all like to see," said Bob Fallen, the commissioner of the United States Hockey League, the only Tier 1 junior hockey league in the country. "I'm not sure what's going to be the next trigger." Fallen's league has been a major feeder system for college hockey. About a third of N.C.A.A. Division I hockey players spent at least one season in the U.S.H.L. The league has added teams in recent years and grown more attractive to Europeans, creating even more Division I-caliber players.

According to U.S.A. Hockey, the number of registered hockey players increased 24 percent in the past 15 years, to 543,000 in 2016, after growing 125 percent from 1991 to 2001. Credit the Gretzky effect, in which youth hockey took hold first in Southern California after Wayne Gretzky was traded to the Los Angeles Kings in 1988, then throughout the Sun Belt as the N.H.L. added or relocated teams in Phoenix, Dallas, Tampa, Fla., and South Florida over the next decade. There have been spikes in participation in the Bay Area and St. Louis, which produced five first-round picks in the 2016 N.H.L. draft.

More college teams also are recruiting in Europe, and when they are not, online services that have become available in the past decade allow coaches to watch games and track players from Europe and North America via their computers. "Good players have a tendency to get found now," Minnesota State Coach Mike Hastings said.

According to College Hockey Inc., a record 82 Europeans played in Division I this season. There were only 32 five years ago. Twenty-two Europeans are on teams in the N.C.A.A. tournament, which begins Friday. Top-seeded Denver is led in scoring by Henrik Borgstrom, a freshman forward from Finland. Penn State's Denis Smirnov, a Russian, led all freshmen in points this season, with 45.

The impact of well-developed players is evident throughout the sport. Of the 23 members of this year's gold medal-winning American team at the World Junior Championships, 19 were current college players, representing 11 universities. Another 13 college players or recruits played on other teams in the tournament. Last season, 30 percent of N.H.L. players were college products. Already 32 collegians from last season have made their N.H.L. debuts in 2016-17. "The quality and depth that can be recruited to Division I has never been

deeper,” he said. Bill Daly added that the league was working with member clubs on ways to promote growth in college hockey. Thus far, he said, “We’ve only scratched the surface.”

For players for whom there is no room in Division I, there are other avenues to college hockey. “The real beneficiary is Division III,” American International College Coach Eric Lang said. “There are about 40 to 50 players who spill over into D-III who are D-I players.” (Division II is a minor player with only one 15-member conference.) Also benefiting is the American Collegiate Hockey Association, which encompasses more than 250 club teams in three divisions. Penn State and Arizona State won national championships in the A.C.H.A.’s top division before ascending to Division I, and a number of other schools have perennially strong teams. “We can truthfully say our top teams can compete with the top third of N.C.A.A. Division III teams,” said Chico Adrahtas, the coach of Robert Morris-Illinois, a club hockey power. A.C.H.A. teams offer players a longer season and a chance to attend colleges in Power 5 conferences. Arizona State Coach Greg Powers, who led the Sun Devils to the national title in 2014 in their next-to-last season in the A.C.H.A, said, “There are a lot of pretty good players who want the big-school experience, so they’ll go to places like Iowa State, Illinois and Oklahoma.” Though there are a limited number of roster spots in Division I, Powers said the current climate helped the prospective player “because there are so many good programs.”

As evidence, four of the past six N.C.A.A. champions were first-time winners. Only half of the 16-team field of last year’s N.C.A.A. tournament returned for this year’s tournament, and no conference tournament champion repeated in 2017. More than half of all Division I teams (34) have reached the N.C.A.A. tournament in the last five years.

This season has demonstrated how, as Penn State Coach Guy Gadowsky said, “the gap gets closer and closer” between teams at the top and the bottom of Division I. On Jan. 13, the top three teams in the USCHO.com poll all lost, including then-No. 2 Harvard 4-0 to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, which entered the game 3-19-1. Of the top 20 teams in the Jan. 16 poll, only six avoided a loss or tie in the following week, and No. 1 Boston University lost its two games to a Hockey East colleague, Merrimack, which had won only two league games at the time. “That’s not going to happen in college football,” Bemidji State Coach Tom Serratore said. “The No. 100 team isn’t going to beat Alabama or Ohio State.” Yet it is almost expected in college hockey, said Hastings of Minnesota State. “In football, baseball and basketball, you don’t see the No. 1, 2 or 3 teams beaten by somebody in the bottom half,” he said. “That happens every weekend in our sport.”

The biggest obstacle to adding teams is money. Penn State moved to Division I only after an alumnus, the Buffalo Sabers and Bills owner Terry Pegula, donated \$102 million to build an ice arena and fund scholarships. The catalyst for Arizona State, which still plays most of its home games at an off-campus rink, was two donations totaling \$32 million.

The Atlantic Hockey Conference has been seeking to expand beyond its 11 teams for a couple of years, negotiating with two teams in the A.C.H.A. Commissioner Bob DeGregorio said the earliest it could expand would be the 2018-19 season. Because of Title IX, the federal law mandating nondiscriminatory funding at educational institutions, adding scholarships for a men’s sport requires a comparable increase for women’s sports. Most Division I hockey programs provide the 18 maximum allowable scholarships.

U.S.A. Hockey’s executive director, Dave Ogrea, cited the economics of hockey as the primary impediment to expansion. “Obviously, it costs a lot of money,” he said. “That’s why you’re never going to have an explosion in the number of programs.”

For now, college hockey will have to settle for an explosion of players.