

Does the puck stop here?

Could hockey be in decline? Is it heading toward the fall which overtook lacrosse between 1914 and 1930?

A quick review of my clippings on minor hockey shows that the problems raised by the recent Ontario Hockey Council surveys (supported by the Hon. Reuben Baetz) have come up again and again in the papers over the past 15 years. This is the second Ontario survey. Remember Bill McMurtry's one on violence a few years ago? Five other provinces have had official or semi-official inquiries and reports.

Mr. Baetz has wisely declared as the best solution, a "hands off" approach by the government, insisting on "self-regulation." Since the issues have kept recurring one may doubt the worth of self-regulation and wonder more why there is such a failure of leadership in hockey itself.

If the game really means so much — and few of us do not pose as authorities on hockey — one wonders whether political and governmental interest will decline as the game withers, as it seems to be withering, or whether we'll have more surges of feeling that somebody ought to do something about it. Even though it is only a game, the failures within hockey and its leadership seem profound enough to ask why?

Why do parents want their children to play "more like the Russians?" Why are so many calling for more "skills" training and a higher ratio of practice time to playing time? Why is there so much fear among parents and kids about brutality? Why have we such huge numbers of boys playing the game between the ages of eight and fourteen, and such a staggering drop-off after reaching mid-teens?

Young boys know as well as their coaches and parents that if they haven't shown professional potential by the time they are 14 their days are numbered in competitive hockey. If one can't be drawn in the annual auctions, first at the midget level, then at junior, there seem few alternatives. It's as though a harsh national selection process "vets" tens of thousands of kids to get a couple of thousand with the potential at age 15 to go on in intensive, nine-month seasons to become the several hundred annually who can contend for professional places.

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For those winnowed by the peewee, bantam, and midget stages there are very limited alternatives in schools.

Many young people do most of their physical maturing and strengthening after the age of 15. Often a clumsy, rather unco-ordinated lad at that age is powerful and adroit by 19 or 20.

The acquisition of skills in the basics of hockey such as skating, stick-handling and passing, can be systematically developed even when players are mature men. One can go back to Flash Hollett or Pete Slobodian, NHL players of the past who could hardly skate in their teens.

Hockey leadership never seems capable of standing a distance from our hockey set-up and asking about alternatives. The north European club system and the American school system are alternatives. The club system in Europe does produce the elite athlete but the emphasis is on participation, on recreation. There is a social context and not so much stress on achievement. Children are not made to feel inadequate, nor left out. The encouragement is to compete at their level with lots of opportunity to move up as an adult to the club's no. 1 team. In sports such as field hockey, rugby, even soccer, there are large, well-organized and tiered leagues of amateur competition for adults. The clubhouse is the centre of the social aspect which is so absent from our hockey.

There have been occasional efforts here and there to tie hockey to the schools, particularly high schools, but there is a gulf between hockey and every level of our education, including colleges and universities. In New England and the Lake States the Americans do better, and their school play ties with their universities. The latter are so successful as training grounds that they lure hundreds of Canadian players.

Isn't there something worth appraising in their system which increasingly sends excellent talent into professional hockey without the grossness of the 100 games a year which mark our junior hockey?

Demography may also curb a hockey renaissance. Last year the birth rate dropped again. Where I live, with its large number of hockey rinks, boys increasingly tune out of hockey. Other lifetime or carry-on sports are gaining players at hockey's expense.

Hockey is seen more and more as vulgar or very specialized, a career path for a few. The models are in the NHL but there's no coherent sense of responsibility for the game at its roots either in the NHL or in the competitive obsessions of amateur hockey's leadership.

How long can hockey go on being just for a top-dressing of gladiators and a narrow age-range of our youth before it's gone the way of lacrosse? Give it a decade and the wider spread of more TV channels across Canada.