

STATE OF THE GAME

Developing Development



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Almost like clockwork at this time of year, right around the NHL all-star game, the topic of player development comes up. This past week there was an interesting article in *The Puck*, the Thursday hockey insert in the *Detroit*

Free Press, on how Europeans are taking over the game at the higher levels.

The article began by noting that the 12 NHL all-star game starters consisted of six Europeans, three Americans and three Canadians, and that the percentage of Canadian players has dwindled from 82.5% twenty years ago to 53.6% today, while the European contribution has grown at a consistent pace to 33.3% this year. Currently, 13% of NHL players are Americans, a number that has declined at a minimal rate, while at the same time that the game has enjoyed record growth in terms of numbers of players playing in this country.

So, why are NHL general managers and their scouting staffs spending more time in Europe? And what should we be doing in North America? There are a few schools of thought:

Florida Panthers' general manager Rick Dudley told the *Free Press* the reason is very simple, "They develop better players."

That seems to be fairly apparent, so the next question would be why? Corcy McNabb, a manager of player development for the Canadian Hockey Association says that "we don't practice enough, and we place too much emphasis on winning."

Panthers' assistant coach George Kingston has coached at the youth, college and pro levels in both Canada and the U.S. and national teams in Germany and Norway, and has spent years studying the Russian system. He says our "games model" is the root of all of the problems.

"We produce wonderful game players," he said in the same article. "However, we don't have the skills to play the games. In Europe they practice four, five, six times for every game played. In North America, it is absolutely the reverse."

Collegiate coach John Harrington, a member of the U.S. 1980 gold-medal winning Olympic team, concluded that in North America "players are coached not to lose and that is a big difference from playing to win. When you are afraid to lose you do things as simply as possible. All you learn is not to screw up."

But by far, the most astute statement that I have heard regarding player development was from Vancouver Canucks' general manager Brian Burke, a Minnesota native, who had this to say a couple of summers ago while addressing the British Columbia Amateur Hockey Association:

"No one in minor hockey should think they are developing players for us," Burke said. "The odds are very significant that most coaches who coach minor hockey in B.C. will never coach a player who plays for me. So don't gear the programs for the elite kids. The elite kids will get there [to the NHL] regardless. We want as many boys and girls playing hockey as possible."

Are those mixed messages? Are you a little confused? While many hockey minds are saying we need to change our methods, Burke seems to be saying we need to change our focus. And I believe

he is right on the money.

The word "development" is without a doubt the most overused and misunderstood word in the English language, at least in how it is used in youth hockey circles.

The notion that the youth hockey system is "developing" NHL hockey players is absurd. The only development that should be focused on in youth hockey for players under the age of 13 is first, that they develop a passion for the game so that they want to continue playing it and second, that they develop some basic skills and solid hockey habits.

Coincidentally, there is an excellent article in the latest issue of *American Hockey Magazine* by University of Alaska-Fairbanks Nanooks head coach Guy Gadowsky on Youth Hockey Development Habits that should serve as a blueprint for any youth coach.

The USA Hockey National Team Development Program in Ann Arbor for the top 17 and 18 year-old players in the country is appropriately named. At that age, those players (as well as others across the country in that age group) are the ones that have the potential to be selected and "developed" into possible NHL players.

Do youth hockey teams in North America have too few practices, play too many games and place too much of an emphasis on winning and does that structure hinder the development of elite players? Absolutely they do and absolutely it does. The proof is in the numbers. But can that be changed? The face of the game has changed dramatically in the past 20 years, especially here in the richest country in the world. Players and parents not only expect instant gratification. They demand it.

And what is that instant gratification? It's being

the "best" and being it now. Selecting the best players to create "elite" teams, playing as many games as possible, traveling far and wide to test their worth and see how they measure up against other "elite" teams. Ironically, the one reason most often cited in support of this system is "development".

The concept of "creep" is a phenomenon that has engulfed the youth sports culture as a result of our need for instant gratification. A competitive structure that was once reserved for high school age athletes and above has now worked its way down to the youngest age groups. The theory being that if that model works at that age group, it can work at younger age groups as well.

But it doesn't. And it can't. And the reason is that those players are not yet to the point where they should be segregated, the "elite" separated from the pack and developed more seriously than the non-elite. Unfortunately, we do not allow them to them to mature to the point where that should happen.

It's a lot like planting a garden in the spring and once some of the plants have started to sprout earlier than the others, digging up the others, and only allowing the early bloomers the opportunity to grow.

As Burke suggested, the real purpose of any youth sport is not to develop players for advanced levels of competition. But a good system will produce high quality players as a by-product, not as its focus. We just need to be more patient gardeners.

What are your thoughts on the state of the game in Michigan? Voice your opinion on the discussion board at www.michiganhockeyonline.com or email lphair@michiganhockeyonline.com.