

Section 4 – Canadian Hockey Developmental Pathways

Hockey in Canada has come a long way in terms of the awareness and support of the different aspects of players lives. It is no longer ok or acceptable to ignore other needs. Programs to support mental health awareness, substance abuse, physical health and fitness, anti-bullying initiatives, understanding of racism and other forms of discrimination, expected community involvement and charitable activities, expansion of career development opportunities and so much more are now a growing part of the junior hockey experience. There is much more to do but we now have model programs to follow, resource people and mentors to help us.

All these initiatives should be part of the holistic education of every young person. So should the formal education of each player. The role of education and training in their lives must be supported and valued. It is no longer acceptable to pay lip service to this critical component of there lives. Nor is it appropriate to expect players to put these things on hold or defer them until their hockey career is over.

1. Introduction

When young boys and girls start playing hockey at a very young age within various sport organizations, they are in pursuit of an experience that is both fun and rewarding. As they grow older and move up in competitive levels, the game should still be fun. Wading through the many aspects concerning what is best for the player, however, can become more complicated. The following information about the process can offer quite a challenge for players and their parents as they try to navigate through the many obstacles attempting to find answers to questions before making critical decisions.

The critical "decision points" for parents and the player usually occur when Academies and Junior level scouts, coaches, and team administrators begin taking special interest in players as early as U13 (12 years old) and U15 (13 and 14 years old) levels of hockey. Being invited to play for teams at the elite U15, U18 and Junior levels, may mean the player will move to another community, live with another family, and transfer to a different school. In some cases, a player may be presented with the opportunity to move out of province or even to the United States.

This section of our guide has been modified from a model first developed by Hockey Canada. Its goal is to provide young players and their parents with information required to make these decisions and to ensure that the choices being made are in the best interest of the athlete. This handbook serves as an introduction to what the Canadian hockey system offers young hockey players. For more detailed information on leagues and teams and the various programs and opportunities, you are encouraged to visit the Hockey Canada website at www.hockeycanada.ca.

2. Brief History

- Hockey is an integral part of Canadian culture.
- The great passion among a vast majority of Canadians - young and old - is to participate in the game as a player, coach, official, or administrator at all levels
- The evolution of the hockey development system in Canada has been unique compared to most sports developmental systems in North America. Consequently, for over 70 years, a hockey infrastructure has evolved in Canada on a community, district, and national level to meet the needs of all young athletes - male and female.
- Through the 1970's, a more formalized structure relative to the organization of leagues, player categories, and coaching certification evolved under the direction of Hockey Canada and its predecessor, the Canadian Hockey Association.
- Leadership by Canadian hockey governing bodies, along with provincial and federal government sports leaders, has resulted in the infusion of considerable funds to enhance growth, appropriate monitoring, consistent regulations, rules, and control across the country.
- Most amateur hockey in Canada falls under the auspices of Hockey Canada. The organization is headquartered in Calgary, Alberta. It is here that Canada's National Men's and Women's programs along with administrators, development, communications, and event staff are situated.
- Hockey Canada (HC) is the main governing body for amateur hockey in Canada and is the organization that operates national hockey programs in cooperation with its many branch associations, the Canadian Hockey League (CHL), Canadian University Sport (U-Sport), and the Canadian College Athletics Association (CCAA)
- In recent years, several organizations at various levels, have developed or have moved away from the Hockey Canada umbrella. These Independent leagues have no affiliation with the rights and responsibilities of Hockey Canada. They do, however, offer another structure to the overall opportunities of hockey in Canada.
- The origin of hockey in Canada has never been established definitively. Claims have been made on behalf of many localities, notably Montreal, Halifax and Kingston, and the controversy will no doubt continue.
- The first organization dealing with the administration and development of the sport was the Ontario Hockey Association which was organized on the 27th of November 1890.
- Over the years in other parts of Canada, more organizations came into existence, and, on December 4th, 1914, the first meeting of a national body known as the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association, was held at the Chateau Laurier in Ottawa. While it was fitting that the first meeting should be held in Canada's capital city, the impetus for the organization was provided by a group of men in Winnipeg - a Western city which has had such a notable connection with the sport.
- The Canadian Amateur Hockey Association became the Canadian Hockey Association in 1994 when the CAHA merged with Hockey Canada. In 2003, the organization became formally known as Hockey Canada.

- The structure of Hockey Canada consists of 13 member Branches that each administers Hockey Canada programming in their jurisdiction. Direct jurisdiction of amateur hockey, however, does not extend to the Canadian Hockey League, Canadian U-Sport, and the Canadian College Athletic Association. These organizations are referred to as Affiliate members of Hockey Canada and enjoy many of the privileges of membership. These three groups have a formal structure in place that governs their activities within their specific leagues and conferences while maintaining a close working relationship with Hockey Canada. Independent leagues operate outside of Hockey Canada and their Branches jurisdiction.

3. Keeping the Best Players in the Canadian System

- Canada has long been a nation renowned for producing elite hockey talent and has been the leading producer of NHL caliber players for decades.
- Not only is Canada home to the best hockey development system in the world, but it affords excellent educational opportunities without compromising academic objectives.
- For this reason, it is possible for Canada's young elite players to pursue their entire amateur hockey careers in this country, although at some point opportunities in the US may become preferable.
- By staying within the Canadian Hockey Development system, young players have the best opportunity not only to extend their hockey skills to the elite level necessary to advance to the university or college level while also to succeeding in their scholastic pursuits.
- More and more hockey leaders understand the importance of linking elite hockey development with a focused educational program that encourages players to give appropriate attention to moving through high school, graduating on time, and securing the necessary credentials to enter a post-secondary program in university or technical school
- The growth of sports schools devoted to the sport of hockey but within, or in partnership with, educational institutions accelerated in the early 2000's
- In 2009, five like-minded Hockey Canada Accredited Schools came together to launch the Canadian Sport School Hockey League. Their vision was to establish a league designed specifically for elite level student athletes, give these athletes an opportunity to increase their skills on and off the ice, and provide athletes with a high level of competition as well as exposure. The inaugural 2009-10 season featured five sport schools, and eight total teams spread across two divisions.
- Over the years, the CSSHL has grown to encompass 37 Accredited Schools/Schools with Residence and 125 teams in eight different divisions.
- This new developmental pathway creates additional opportunities for elite young players across Canada, but it has come at a cost to the traditional Minor Hockey routes who have seen their talent pools reduced significantly at the U15, U17 and U18 levels.
- Another source of competition has become the growth of independent U15, U17 and U18 teams and organizations in some communities.
- These approaches now mean that elite hockey pathways across the country have changed and expanded, leading to Junior A and Major Junior hockey and ultimately university and professional hockey.
- The issues of youth leaving home at earlier ages (in some cases as early as U13), increased costs, acceleration of societal stratification, travel, lost school time, early specialization, and youth development being more and more at arm's length from traditional parenting are very real and worrisome.

- Canadian Hockey League (CHL) still produces more NHL players than any other development league in the world, but the NCAA and expansion internationally have seen the fastest and largest growth.
- The CHL is the leading provider of post-secondary scholarships in Canada, however, the NCAA decision to open the door to Major Junior players in August 2025 is predicted to have significant impact on these statistics.
- The underlying principle of the club system is that organizations at all levels compliment, rather than compete with one another, has fundamentally changed. Players have more opportunities and pathways to advance through the developmental process and compete at the highest possible level appropriate to their ability.
- Although players are encouraged to play at the highest possible level within the various systems, the pace at which players advance will be determined and guided by the player's overall maturation and development.
- Players are encouraged to explore all options available to them within the Canadian and American Systems at the Major Junior, Junior A tier 1 and 2, Junior B, and ultimately Canadian and American University and College levels.
- It is a priority to encourage players to compete at the highest possible level within the system. Players that possess extraordinary skill combined with the necessary physical and mental maturity need to advance to an appropriate level provided the opportunity is available to develop by playing on a regular basis. Teams must agree to exercise patience in setting the pace at which players advance through the system and to act in the best interest of the player's overall development. All levels agree that should a player not be capable of competing in the top level of the Canadian System - the CHL, it may be fitting to keep open all his avenues of opportunity. Should the circumstances not be favorable to the player's best interest, the player and parent/guardian will be counseled on the situation and advised of options on an appropriate career path.
- It is Canada's goal to design a structure that meets the needs of all players and increase the number of players who choose each year to participate in the Canadian system. Players maintain the right, however, to consider alternatives outside of the Canadian model.

Progression of Players Through Development Stages

Professional Hockey

U-Sport / College Hockey / NCAA

College Clubs in Canada (BCIHL) and the US (ACHA)

Canadian Hockey League (Major Junior)

Top American Junior (USHL, NAHL etc)

Canadian Junior Hockey (and the independent BCHL)

CDN and US Junior A tier 1 and 2

Junior B, C, D Hockey

U18 AAA (Minor Hockey, CCSHL and Independent)

U18 AA (Minor Hockey, CCSHL and Independent)

U15 AAA (Minor Hockey, CCSHL and Independent)

U15 AA (Minor Hockey, CCSHL and Independent)

U13 AAA (Minor Hockey, CCSHL and Independent)

4. Structure within the Canadian System

The following chart outlines the structure of participation within the Canadian system:

Age Levels within each division of hockey

LEVEL/AGE	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Major Jr				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Junior A tier 1				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Junior A tier 2				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Junior B				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Junior C/D				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
U18 AAA			✓	✓	✓			
U18 AA			✓	✓	✓			
U15	✓	✓						

Major Junior

- Canadian Hockey League comprises 60 franchises in three regional member leagues
 - Western Hockey League (22)
 - Ontario Hockey League (20)
 - Quebec Major Junior Hockey League (18)
- Leaders in developing players for the NHL and other professional leagues
- CHL players maintain eligibility to play within the Canadian University and College systems and now in American NCAA Division 1 and 3 systems as of August 2025.
- Provide full academic scholarships for players who participate play in Canadian Universities and Colleges as well as maintaining eligibility for NCAA scholarships from D1 schools (Aug 25).
- League championship teams qualify for the Memorial Cup (the CHL Championship)
- Leading supplier of players, coaches and officials representing Canada at the annual World Junior Championships, World Under 18 Championships, and World Under 17 Hockey Challenge

Junior "A"

- Canadian Junior "A" Hockey League comprised of over 100 teams in 9 provincial and regional member leagues.
- The BCHL is an Independent Junior A league that is not part of the CJHL.
- Provides additional development for players 16-20 prior to advancing to Major Junior or college hockey.
- Provides development and maintains eligibility for players seeking university and college opportunities throughout North America and abroad
- Provides opportunities to showcase athletes to the NHL through CJHL Program of Excellence including the CJHL Prospects Game and the World Junior A challenge (except BCHL players).

Junior "A Tier 2 / Junior B

- Provincially, regionally and locally organized and governed leagues
- Tier 2 Junior A and Junior "B" provides additional development for players 16-20 years old prior to advancing to Junior "A", Major Junior, university and/or professional hockey

Junior "C"/"D"/U21

- Provides an opportunity for all Junior age players to play recreationally. It can also be an introduction to junior hockey for many graduating U18 players

U18 "AAA"

- The top level of the U18 category
- Provincially and regionally organized and governed leagues as well as independent leagues.
- One objective is to provide development opportunities for players to advance to Junior and Major Junior hockey programs
- Sanctioned teams can compete for regional championships and Hockey Canada's National Championship and the Telus Cup.

U18 "AA"/"A"

- One focus is to develop players for advancement to U18 AAA and/or Junior programs

U15 "AA"

- The top level of competition for the highest ranked players in U15 age categories (13-14 yrs old)
- One objective is to develop players to advance to U18 AA level

5. Education within the Canadian Hockey System

- Elite hockey players desire to pursue the game at the highest competitive level possible. Many elite level players choose Major Junior Hockey Leagues in order to enhance their chances of advancing to the professional level
- Normally, players entering Major Junior and other Junior Leagues at age 16 or 17 have not achieved high school graduation. As a result, parents may be concerned about the ongoing educational development of their sons in this highly intense competitive environment. In the CHL, players have every opportunity to move forward academically, graduate from high school on time, and take post-secondary courses while playing in the League
- Administrators, coaches, and volunteers involved at elite levels of hockey are committed to the development of the "whole" person entrusted to their care. Since education is a critical component within all these organizations, leadership in fulfilling the academic needs of these young men is of utmost importance
- Major Junior and Junior hockey should be an environment in which a player can combine high performance athletic development without compromising education.

- During a player's tenure in elite hockey programs, a formalized academic team of professionals should be in place to support him academically. Such personnel can include:
 - League Directors of Educational Services
 - Individual Club Education Advisors
 - High School and College Counsellors at the site of Junior Teams
 - The High School Counsellor at the player's home school
 - Team and community mentors
- All Major Junior and Junior A Clubs are required to provide a team of education experts who are responsible:
 - Provide guidance and advice to players prior to moving into a top elite program
 - Monitor academic progress throughout the school term - both during the season and when the player returns to his home school
 - Advise players about course selection and graduation requirements
 - Inform players about College, Technical School, and University opportunities once high school graduation has been achieved.
 - Promote and facilitate post-secondary school and training opportunities while playing Junior hockey
 - Explore personal interests and career prep opportunities outside of hockey
- All elite sport, such as Canadian Major Junior and Junior hockey, should provide an outstanding environment to help young men develop very valuable basic personal qualities that will enhance any career once their playing days are over. These should include
 - Athletic ability and a high level of physical fitness
 - Personal discipline and self-regulation skills
 - Ability to deal with adversity and pressure and maintain positive mental health
 - Time management in balancing the demands of intense competition, practice times, travel, and maintaining appropriate academic performance
 - A sound understanding of what it means to be part of a team, cooperation, collaboration, problem solving, and getting along.
 - The mental skills required in analyzing and making decisions quickly in stressful situations
 - Understanding the meaning and application of commitment, responsibility, and perseverance.
 - Awareness and utilization of resources, organizations, and people
- Built into these traits are other personal qualities such as integrity, honesty, good moral character, and personal deportment that are integral to playing the game at any level and developing a positive life.
- As a result of these inherent qualities, graduates of Major Junior and Junior A hockey are heavily recruited by Canadian Universities, Colleges and NCAA programs in the US. Hockey coaches in these institutions seek these athletes to enhance their programs. The reality is that the inherent qualities described above provide a solid platform for Major Junior and Junior A graduates to be very successful academically and achieve a degree or diploma at the post-secondary level and go on to rewarding careers outside of hockey.
- For athletes who do not have the opportunity to play hockey at the highest professional level, the University/College hockey programs are a natural progression in the Canadian Development Model. It is here that players can continue to improve their skills, compete at a very high level, and often, move on to professional hockey once their degree or diploma is completed.
- All member clubs and Leagues within the Canadian Hockey League Western Hockey League, Ontario Hockey League, and Quebec Major Jr) offer scholarships which allow players the opportunity to pursue a college or University education in Canada following their graduation from Major Junior hockey. Starting in August 2025 Major Jr players are also eligible for NCAA scholarships which previously we only available to Junior A players or American players outside Major Jr.

Further and more detailed information on Major and Junior A Leagues and Canadian and US university programs can be found on the Websites listed below:

Ontario Hockey League [Official Website of the OHL](#)
Best of Both Worlds www.bestofbothworlds.ca/hm
Quebec Major Junior Hockey League www.lhjmq.qc.ca
Western Hockey League www.whl.ca/education
Canadian U-Sport www.usports.ca
National Collegiate Athletic Association www.ncaa.org
Canadian Junior A Hockey League www.cjhlhockey.com
British Columbia Hockey League www.bchl.bc.ca
Alberta Junior Hockey League www.ajhl.ab.ca
Saskatchewan Junior Hockey League www.sjhl.sk.ca
Manitoba Junior Hockey League www.mjhlhockey.ca
Superior International Junior Hockey League www.sijhl.com
Ontario Provincial Junior Hockey League www.opjhl.ca
Northern Ontario Junior Hockey League www.nojhl.com
Central Junior A Hockey League www.cjhl.on.ca
Ligue de hockey junior AAA du Quebec www.lhjaaaq.qc.ca
Maritime Junior A Hockey League www.mjahl.com

For more information please contact:

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