State of the Game (substitute soccer for hockey)
Let them play

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In the second part of a three-part exclusive series examining the state of hockey in New England, New England Hockey Journal takes a look at how cultural and societal changes have affected how the region's youths develop their games.

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There are more teams, games, programs, camps and tournaments than ever before. It's hard to argue that more ice time and more puck touches don't help a player's game, but, according to the sources New England Hockey Journal spoke with for this series, there is a limit.

"A typical youth hockey player plays way longer than the NHL," said former St. Sebastian's School coach Steve Dagdigian (Needham, Mass.). "How sick is that?"

Dagdigian said that he always recognizes when he's ready for a break from the rink to recharge his batteries. And he's coaching, not playing.

"The general trend is kids are playing too much hockey, at too young an age," he said. "How do you change these things? Parents think you've got to do this (and) you've got to do that. You don't. Not at those younger ages. You get to 15-, 16-years-old you can start to focus on one sport. Even in high school, some of our best players were kids that played multiple sports. They're better hockey players for playing other sports."

Dagdigian mentioned that his Needham High School teammate, schoolboy legend Robbie Ftorek, had more college offers for soccer than hockey. St. Seb's alum and current pro Brian Boyle (Hingham, Mass.) was a first-round NHL draft pick, but also an outstanding shortstop in baseball.

As rinks dictate longer ice rental contracts from youth hockey organizations, many seasons stretch from September to April with anywhere from 40 to 80 to even *hundreds* of games. In-season, there are skill sessions and tournaments. In what used to be the offseason, there are more tournaments than ever, more tournament teams and more camps.

"The product in the summer is watered down," said Bob Corkum (Newbury, Mass.), the associate head coach at the University of Maine. "It's selfish play: 'Look at me. Look at what I can do.' There's no systems, no credibility. … Most of the guys that do well at those things are already on the radar. In my opinion, it's just a money maker."

Said Colorado Avalanche scout Neil Shea (Marshfield, Mass.): “Now kids are 9-years-old and think they have to skate seven days a week. They think they’re missing something. They’re burnt out by the time they’re 13.”

Increasingly, as sport seasons overlap, more and more hockey players are playing other sports less. Before going to Maine for hockey, Corkum was a three-sport athlete at Triton Regional High School and “only played those sports in those seasons.”

When he was coaching with the New Hampshire Jr. Monarchs, Corkum said, the team would have team-bonding games of flag football — and there would be guys who couldn’t throw a ball.

At Maine, he added, the team is split into three squads for what’s termed the “Black Bear Games,” which consist of team-building activities like dodge ball. “You could tell the prep school guys because they were forced to play three sports in school and they were dominating,” Corkum said.

John McNamara (Newton, Mass.), who coaches the Boston Jr. Eagles and at the Belmont Hill school, and Dagdigian both cited European models of training. In-season, they probably skate more than Americans, twice per day and often six times per week. But half of those sessions are focused solely on individual skill. And in these systems, there is much more off-ice training, which involves playing other sports, and also more time away from the rink.

Boston University coach Jack Parker (Somerville, Mass.) has long advocated for hockey players to play other sports. Many others, like Jim Johansson, USA Hockey’s assistant executive director for hockey operations, have said that to get the best hockey players, they have to make sure the best athletes are playing the game.

“There’s too much on hockey at too early an age,” said Noble and Greenough coach Brian Day, noting that nearly every player on his Nobles team plays at least two sports. “It doesn’t allow for kids’ athleticism to develop. There’s no substitute for having kids run around.”

More is less

For this series, New England Hockey Journal discussed the state of hockey in New England with a collection of pro scouts; college, prep, high school and youth coaches; camp directors; former NHL and college players; the heads of USA Hockey’s Massachusetts and New England districts; and USA Hockey’s assistant executive director for hockey operations.

Getting back to the last point: How often do you see kids just running around by themselves? Society has changed because of so many horrible crimes against children. The days of kids going off to play in the neighborhood or at the park and coming home when the street lights come on are drawing to a close, if they haven’t closed already.

In terms of hockey, it means kids play less street hockey, which means there is less opportunity to increase hand skills and develop creativity. It also means a decrease in playing other sports,

which means less independent thought, less learning how to be competitive, less settling of their own differences and less camaraderie.

As a result, most recreational and athletic outlets have more structure and more parental involvement -- which is good on some levels but not so good on others.

Like pickup basketball, street hockey and pond hockey give the opportunity to just play the game and learn without realizing they're learning it. These days, if kids aren't playing street hockey, can you see like-minded parents letting their 10-year-olds walk to the local pond for an afternoon of shinny?

McNamara relayed a story told to him by his Boston College roommate, Doug Brown (Southborough, Mass.), who won two Stanley Cups in his 15-year NHL career.

Brown told McNamara he wouldn't have done anything different in terms of attending St. Mark's, playing multiple sports and going to BC. If there was anything Brown would have changed, McNamara said, it was that he would have played more shinny to make his hands even better.

Everything now is scoreboards, uniforms, officials and coaches. Even play dates.

"We over structure kids' lives," said Day, the coach at Nobles. "We don't allow kids to develop leadership skills at a younger age. Younger kids could care less about what the scores of games are."

Parental pressures

Whether it's "soccer parents" or "hockey parents," those terms are usually not perceived as positive ones.

As kids do less and less on their own, the role of parents has never been greater. For example, when children need a ride somewhere, the parent waits, watches and usually develops some ideas and/or criticisms. Just as the role of parents runs the spectrum from positive to negative, so do the reactions. In hockey, especially, much time -- often at horrible times of the morning -- and money is invested. There's a natural desire to want a return on the investment.

"When you have parents who grew up in the game, they're realistic," said Dagdigian. "So often, parents who never were in the game have these expectations thinking that (since) we put so much into it, we should get this much out of it. What you should get out of it is your kid smiling and having fun. Anything else is just gravy."

There's also a natural desire to travel with the pack or keep up with the Joneses. With the plethora of offseason camps and tournaments available, it leads to peer pressure to keep up and make sure their kids are not missing something.

“Delusional parents living life through their kids,” pronounced Shea. “Some guy from Alaska calls and says, ‘You have to play in this tournament to get exposed.’ Exposed? You think Jack Parker is going to be in Alaska?

“Enjoy it for what it’s worth. If you get to a good high school and play hockey, you’re fortunate. Use hockey to open doors. Get it out of your head that you’re going to make a living at it. Eleven-year-olds’ parents have asked me about college. Are you out of your mind?”

BU goalie coach Mike Geragosian (Stoneham, Mass.) remembered his kids going to Winthrop for street hockey tournaments. Today, it’s off to Chicago or Montreal.

“I’ll ask a goalie, ‘How many shots did you get that weekend?’ You get 15 shots, divide that into 700 dollars,” Geragosian said. “Wouldn’t you rather get instruction?

“(And) there’s peer pressure. It’s not OK to just play for fun.”

Once upon a time, local town hockey organizations had intramural, or house, leagues. There were tryouts for usually two travel teams per age group and if you didn’t make it, the house league provided somewhere to play. House leagues today have gone the way of Cooperalls.

Larry Reid (Rumford, R.I.), the managing director of USA Hockey’s New England district, recalled that when his son played, Rhode Island had 22 youth programs and every one had house leagues. Now, there are 14 youth programs with one house league.

“Everyone travels,” Reid said. “There’s a stigma if you’re not on the travel team. That’s created by the parents.

“Everybody gets a trophy. Success isn’t the fact your kid is on the ‘A’ team. Success is your son or daughter had a good time, made friends and learned about leadership and teamwork.”

Costly pursuit

It all comes back to money, doesn’t it? The cost of playing hockey has never been higher. And it is keeping people from trying the game or forcing them to leave it.

“It’s now a rich man’s game,” said Ftorek (Needham, Mass.), an American hockey pioneer and now coach of the Ontario Hockey League’s Erie Otters.

Town hockey teams run about $1,500, while EHF, Metro, Atlantic, New England Hockey and Select League teams are between $2,500 and $3,000. That’s not counting equipment — such as $400 skates and $200 sticks — or extras like tournaments, travel, gas, meals, lodging, apparel and often uniforms.

And that’s for one kid.

“It used to be volunteers; now guys get paid to make schedules,” said Massachusetts Hockey president Steve Palmacci (Arlington, Mass.).

Most other youth sports don’t come close in cost.

“Kids have to have the composite sticks,” said Gary Eggleston (Wakefield, Mass.), a 28-year veteran of the NHL’s Central Scouting Service. “They’re not happy with hand-me-down equipment like they used to.”

While acknowledging there are programs interested in dollars over development, Jerry Buckley, a player agent and EHF commissioner, said part of the high cost is due to the recent construction of larger, more modern rinks with enhanced off-ice facilities. The debt load from the financing drives up costs.

Palmacci said Mass. Hockey is one of the best at registering kids from four to six years old, but has trouble retaining them. Cost is one issue they are looking at as well as the availability of other sports.
Travel can also be a turn-off.

“You drive four hours to play a two-hour game and then drive home four hours,” Eggleston said. “That’s a 10-hour day.”

Both cost and travel, as well as changing populations, have led to the decline of urban hockey players, many of our sources said.

“If Keith Tkachuk was 8-years-old today, would he be playing hockey?” asked Jim Johansson of USA Hockey.

Probably not.

Adding to the travel is the boom in the number of teams. The creation of these teams pulls players away from traditional community-based association teams, leading to more town associations merging. The requirement to play in the local association ends after the first year of squirts. So at both the AAA and town level, travel has increased.

“At the top of it, we have too many so-called AAA teams,” said Harvard coach Ted Donato (Dedham, Mass.). “At the bottom of it, we don’t have enough kids getting to play the sport in their own hometown at a reasonable price in a local rink to find out if they enjoy the game. Now, parents are almost trying to find a way out when their 9-year-old wants to play on a travel team playing in Connecticut, New York and Massachusetts in a weekend.

“Now, when a kid hits his first bit of adversity, the parents are relieved and say, ‘Let’s go play lacrosse or soccer or baseball.’”

Buckley says anybody can start a program and call it AAA. There is no USA Hockey designation of AAA. In some ways, it has become a status symbol for players and parents who

want to say they are involved at that level, whether the player is well-suited for it or not, Buckley said. It also becomes a marketing strategy for team operators.

The same was going on with junior hockey. Every team and every league was calling itself Junior A until USA Hockey set up and defined three tiers of junior hockey.

“We can’t tell anybody they can’t play for a club team,” said Palmacci. “It’s the parents’ decision. If they’re offering something someone else isn’t, they’re going to get people to go there if they can afford it. One of the things we have to understand is if it’s better coaching, we need to better educate our coaches. If it’s a name on the shirt and being able to say I play for such and such a team, it’s difficult to change that.”

In Part 3, we will examine two major initiatives, one local and one national, which could have a positive impact on New England hockey. We will also look at other suggestions and issues surrounding improving hockey here, including retaining young players, ice time and cost issues.