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Are players who choose the OHL over college hockey scholarships really getting best of both worlds?

BY JEFF HICKS, RECORD STAFF

KITCHENER — Pop quiz for Ontario Hockey League education czar Joe Birch.

How many current OHL players are full-time university or college students?

"Very, very few," said Birch, a former Kitchener Ranger who ranks No. 94 on the Hockey News honour roll of the 100 most influential men in the business of pucks and pencils.

Can you name one? No answer.

Guelph's Tim Priamo and London's Scott Aarssen are past examples he cited of true OHL student-athletes.

The Rangers have no full-time college or university students.

Team education consultant Dave Tennant says such a course-load would be too strenuous given the demands of a 68-game OHL season. The scheduling of classes around games would be impossible.

Let's get educated on how post-secondary education works in the OHL.

Get out your notebooks, class.

The numbers scrawled on the blackboard by the league sound impressive. For the 2009-10 academic year, the OHL proclaimed last month it has awarded 355 "scholarships" to current and past players.

That's 164 "scholarships" to players currently in the league. Add in 191 "scholarships" to players who've blown through the 20-team major junior loop in a five-year span ending last season.

Sounds like an A-plus for the OHL, right? Surely, as Birch proudly proclaims, a player can get the same education and hockey experience in the OHL as kid at school full-time on a hockey scholarship in a U.S. college.

After all, that's what this is all about.

It's about the recruitment war to lure the best Canadian and American players into the OHL by convincing them they can get the "best of both worlds" in major junior — a hockey-heavy lifestyle now and a top-shelf education afterwards.

Once a kid plays a single OHL game, his U.S. college eligibility is busted since the NCAA considers the OHL a pro loop where players get paid, sign contracts and have agents.

Let's dig deeper into the OHL-provided numbers. Remember, class, there are no dumb questions.

So what does the OHL consider a scholarship when it comes to a current player? Let's look over the league-provided list of 164 recipients.

Well, Rangers goalie Mavric Parks takes a health course twice a week at Conestoga College.

Nothing wrong with that. Very commendable. But a "scholarship"? You decide.

The OHL pays for tuition, books, compulsory fees, etc. It also claims credit for providing room-and-board, which it has always done for players anyway.

There's ex-Ranger Josh Unice at the University of Windsor.

Oh, wait a minute. He went home to Ohio after the Windsor Spitfires ditched him while he was injured. Nice. Did we mention Unice tore up a full-ride scholarship to Bowling Green of Ohio to come to the OHL? He did.

Now, his agent says Unice is at the University of Western Ontario.

There are nine players from six different teams listed as Athabasca University students. That is an online school. No classrooms. They take online courses.

So do eight players from Brampton, Sarnia and Owen Sound who "attend" the University of Guelph, via their computers. Is that the equivalent of living on campus at the University of Michigan and going to class?

Don't forget Guelph Storm benchwarmer Vadim Guskov. He's on the list as a University of Moscow student. That's online, of course. There are more examples but you get the idea.

Let's look at defenceman Nick Crawford. He is listed as a student at Northwood University in Saginaw, Michigan on the OHL list, released on Nov. 24. On Nov. 9, he got traded from Saginaw to Barrie.

Birch said Crawford had met all his educational obligations to Northwood at the time of the trade. That's a pretty short semester.

How about Niagara College student Jay Gilbert? He left the Niagara IceDogs a few weeks ago and demanded a trade that is still pending.

Used to be that OHL players who broke their contracts – left the team without permission – lost all the education funds owing to them. Led to a nasty squabble in Kingston over school money owed to a kid named Brodie Todd.

Not so any longer, said Birch. Gilbert still has his package. "What a player has earned, a player is entitled to," Birch said.

Perhaps, but section 12.1 of the standard player agreement, could certainly be read differently. It says the club may terminate the contract for a variety of reasons, including refusal to provide services, and lose all benefits.

Question time again. How does an OHL educational package work?

Basically, here's the deal. Sounds very sweet. An OHL player is entitled to one year of post-OHL, post-secondary education cash for each year he is in the league.

Play a year, get one year. Play four, get four.

That includes tuition, textbooks and compulsory fees. Top picks, and a limited number of others, also get room and board covered. It can be used at any recognized university or college in the world.

Of course, there are catches. If you sign an NHL, AHL or European pro contract, you lose your education package.

You can keep it if you play in a lower North American pro loop. However, there's another catch. You only have 18 months to access it after leaving the OHL. Otherwise, it disappears.

Then, there's the "domicile" rule. That determines the dollar value of your package per year. The OHL takes the tuition fees at the college or university closest to a player's home.

That's what you get. In the case of a local kid like Waterloo's Matt Smith, it's a little tricky. Smith, a third-string goalie for the Rangers who didn't play one OHL second in 2007-08, lives close to both the University of Waterloo and Wilfrid Laurier University.

Which tuition value does he get? "The higher of the two," Birch said.

Not a big deal, Birch added. Laurier is currently about \$5,700. Waterloo is about 5,900.

Smith's father Clive said the Rangers gave him an average of the two at the time his contract was signed.

Matt, a first year English student at the University of Guelph, gets \$4,500 towards his schooling this year. "Pretty good chunk," Smith said after an exam on Wednesday.

His full tuition is about \$5,700. He must pay to live in residence. After this year, he's on his own to pay for the rest of his schooling.

He dressed one year in the OHL, he gets one year worth of money. Most important, he dressed after Jan. 10 in his lone OHL season.

You see, if you don't play on or beyond that date, your education package is slashed in half for that year.

That's another catch. You see, OHL teams are very concerned about what the education war with the colleges is costing them. Rangers chief operating officer Steve Bienkowski said so at last June's annual general meeting.

The OHL says it spent \$1.8-million on post-secondary education last year, \$1.2-million on past players and \$600,000 on current players. Birch said that will increase for this season.

The Rangers expect to spend \$72,000 on post-secondary classes for current and past players this year. Based on their commitments, they could spend as much as \$775,000 between now and 2014.

Of course, they won't spend anywhere near that. That's because fewer than half of OHL players will ever "access" any of the education money the OHL promises them. Maybe not even half of half of them.

Now, here's the BIG question: What percentage of OHL players access their school package payouts after they leave the league? Birch claims 49 per cent based on a study of overage 20-year-old players, limited to three per team.

The OHL says 24 overagers from last season signed pro deals while 30 tapped into their OHL school packages.

But what about the rest of the kids who never made it the overage year?

You know, the kids who play and leave before becoming 20-year-old victory-lappers like Mike Liambas playing against 16-year-olds like Ben Fanelli?

Birch doesn't think it's fair to look at those numbers even though he lists those guys in his 191 past players now receiving some OHL money towards post-secondary schooling.

He even counts ex-Ranger Chris Gravelding, who left the league after 2004-05, and is accessing his money at the University of Maine.

So, let's look at a four-year cycle. Twenty-five players per roster for 20 teams. That's 500 players.

Now add in an average turnover of seven players per team each year for three years. That's 420 players. We're up to 920 players.

Now add in the players who disappear quickly. The Mike Chmielewskis, Chris Brysons, Charles Lavignes etc. Lavigne, a one-year Rangers backup in net, is on the OHL list for St. Thomas University.

Say, two guys per team each year over four years. That's 160 guys.

Make the grand total 1,080 players, of which 191 are tapping into their OHL education packages after leaving.

That's a payout rate of 18 per cent.

Birch doesn't agree with that method of analyzing out the numbers. But he was not prepared with his own numbers on a four-year cycle, other than the 191 in school with OHL money.

"That doesn't make a lot of sense," Birch said. "That would mean that, on the 25-man roster, myself and three others would be post-secondary educated."

Right. And we haven't even got to the matter of whether they graduate from college or not.

This is just showing up and tapping into the money.

There's another catch. If students take a break from full-time status once they start school on their OHL package, they lose it. Says so in the players' contract.

So, where are the rest of the estimated 900 kids who've passed through the OHL? A few are NHL regulars. Many are in the minors or in Europe. All we know is the rest aren't accessing OHL money for post-secondary education.

Meanwhile, American kids are being sold like never before on coming north to the OHL to pursue a pro contract, while getting all the benefits of a college-style education.

Cam Fowler left a \$50,000 a year scholarship at Notre Dame to join the Windsor Spitfires. A recent Windsor Star article suggested Fowler – whose parents live in Northville, Michigan – could attend Notre Dame on the Spitfires' dime.

The "domicile rule," if applied, could cap Fowler's annual OHL education fund at about \$18,000 based on the top rates at the closet colleges to the family home. That includes Wayne State and Eastern Michigan.

But, according to Birch, the rule doesn't appear to apply to Fowler. "Cam could have received a full-ride from the Windsor Spitfires, no different than he received a full-ride from Notre Dame," Birch said.

Worth \$50,000, if he accesses it? "Yes," Birch said.

Didn't realize it could go that high. Thought it was tied to tuition at the school closes to his parents' house.

"Are you being naïve here?" Birch said.

Guess so.

Of course, the OHL and the Spits need not worry. Fowler is a terrific player and will surely sign an NHL or AHL deal. He likely will never go to college. The OHL is banking on it.

jhicks@therecord.com

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College hockey confronts Canadian recruiting challenges

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By Michelle Brutlag Hosick
The NCAA News



Anastos

Kelly

When it comes to recruiting, college ice hockey coaches compete directly with Canadian junior leagues that offer an education, a pipeline to the NHL and – in some cases – an immediate payday to starry-eyed elite players.

But collegiate hockey officials say those promises aren't always what they seem and that NCAA ice hockey offers better training in all aspects than the Canadian leagues can provide.

To highlight these issues and to promote the sport, Division I ice hockey commissioners have created College Hockey Inc. and hired former National Hockey League Players Association Executive Director Paul Kelly to run the organization.

Kelly, who is charged with marketing and promoting Division I men's ice hockey, says the Canadian junior leagues represent a growing business created to make money and mold players for more professional leagues. Meanwhile, he said NCAA programs are part of the higher education system; if they develop athletes that go on to participate in the professional leagues, it's considered a side benefit.

The two philosophies are vastly different, but are both targeting the same elite, young players.

The Canadian leagues need more players, and the U.S. is developing good ones at an increasing rate. The leagues are recruiting the best talent they can find so they can fill their arenas and meet their business plan. But that business is hurting the collegiate game, something Kelly hopes to stop.

"This is overdue," he said. "The colleges desperately need help. They are losing this battle. I won't let that happen."

Education

One way Kelly hopes to fight the battle is by combating what he calls the “misinformation” spread by the Canadian Hockey League junior organizations. The major junior clubs tout their scholarship programs to prospective players, but collegiate hockey officials warn young players to be aware of the parameters of the educational programs before assuming it is the same as an NCAA grant-in-aid.

Tom Anastos, commissioner of the Central Collegiate Hockey Association, sees little comparison.

“Prospects exploring (the CHL) should make sure they thoroughly understand the ‘conditions’ that come with their scholarships,” he said. “Most of their scholarship money is awarded after the completion of the player’s playing career with them, not simultaneously like ours is.”

Anastos said the CHL claims it has awarded \$4.5 million in scholarship money this year, but NCAA programs award more than \$30 million annually in athletically related financial aid.

Kelly said other rules restrict access to the CHL educational funds. For example, players receive just one year of a college education for every year they play in the Canadian league, and that is forfeited if the player signs a professional contract of any kind (including for a minor league). Players also have 18 months after their career in the league to access the educational funds, and the amount can be limited to the tuition of the college closest to their home.

“Those education packages have numerous flaws,” Kelly said. “If I’m an American kid and I’m done playing up there after two years, I want to get an education. I want to go to Notre Dame. Even if you do live in South Bend by chance, they’ll give you only \$7,000 a year for two years. If you did that and forewent a full or a half scholarship, you made a bad decision.”

Wish list: Earlier contact

NCAA coaches say another part of the problem is that they are often handcuffed by NCAA rules about contacting recruits and scholarship limits. The Canadian leagues can start wooing young players at early ages, but NCAA coaches can’t begin the recruiting process until a player’s junior year. Players often commit to the CHL even before NCAA coaches are allowed to begin the process.

That delayed contact period might give the impression to recruits and their families that college coaches aren’t interested, Anastos said, especially if they are unfamiliar with the rules.

“The entire college hockey environment offers so many more benefits to student-athletes far beyond just the scholarship, which is obviously very significant,” Anastos said. “The collegiate environment offers student-athletes the opportunity to grow and develop their social skills as much as their athletics skills, all within a strong infrastructure and special resources that will assist and support their needs in so many ways.

“Our recruitment issues are less about what we have to offer – because that is significant. Most of our challenges are based on our inability to make contact with prospects earlier in the recruitment process. This would allow us to better educate them on their options, as well as provide them with some indication that college programs are interested in them.”

That’s where Kelly and College Hockey Inc. come in. Because he doesn’t represent a particular institution, Kelly is not bound by the same recruiting rules. He doesn’t promote individual programs but simply educates young hockey players and their families about the benefits of collegiate hockey.

Besides the education aspect, collegiate hockey also offers young players the chance to train with some of the best coaches in the world, Kelly said. The competition schedule is less strenuous for NCAA student-athletes, leaving more time for skill instruction, conditioning and other training.

As the popularity of ice hockey increases, some areas of the country – like Arizona and California – are developing more ice players whose only exposure to the sport is through NHL teams. Because few NCAA teams in those areas sponsor ice hockey, young players aren’t exposed to the collegiate ice hockey environment and can be easily convinced that their best route to the NHL is through the Canadian leagues.

“Statistics say college develops players for the NHL as effectively as the Canadian leagues, with the benefit of developing a foundation for your life,” Kelly said. “If a kid makes a decision to go one way or the other, that’s fine. We just want them to make the decision with the benefit of the most information possible. I can’t stop the Canadian leagues from drafting them at age 14. All I can do is educate them.”

Leaving midseason

Even if a college coach wins the recruiting war and a student-athlete enrolls in an NCAA school and begins the ice hockey season, the retention of the student-athlete is not certain. Kelly cited three student-athletes who recently left their teams at midseason to join junior programs in Canada. The phenomenon has been steadily increasing over the last several years, and he said Canadian teams often continue to recruit prospects even after they have committed to and enrolled in an NCAA institution.

Kelly’s solution is to make all college players a part of USA Hockey. In addition to the insurance benefit provided to members of USA Hockey, the student-athletes would be bound by a transfer agreement in place between the Canadian and U.S. federations that says if you leave your program midseason, you cannot play in another country or for another federation unless you get a waiver from your home federation.

There would be an expense involved in registering student-athletes in this way, but Kelly called it “nominal” and something that would alleviate a problem that can otherwise wreak havoc on a program.

“You lose a kid midseason; you can’t replace him,” he said. “You lose the scholarship, it impacts the whole team. At least if you lose them in the summer, you have a little bit of latitude to do something about it.”

Though Kelly, Anastos and others involved with collegiate ice hockey know they are facing a challenge going forward, they are looking for extraordinary ideas to address their issues, including changes in the way the sport is administered by the NCAA.

“The most important change is for those involved to get a greater understanding of the unique dynamics facing our sport and help find progressive solutions to address them,” Anastos said. “There is no other NCAA sport that competes with another entity for prospects like hockey does – and we need unique solutions.”