

## Calibre of play deteriorates

# Hockey players choose big-time over college

By ALAN RISEN

The quality of hockey in the Canadian college ranks has declined steadily over the past five years. The top college teams, which formerly boasted the strongest amateur lineups on skates, are now inferior to several Junior and Senior A clubs in the country. Teams like the University of Toronto Varsity Blues and the York Yeomen, have not only lost their hold on the top ranks of Canadian amateur hockey, but are also taking beatings from the better American university clubs.

American college teams like Cornell in recent years have humbled the best Canadian college clubs with scores like 9-2 and 8-2, as they posted this season over York and U of T respectively. Teams that in the past were weak sisters in the Canadian college leagues are now knocking off the perennial stronger clubs with surprising ease.

A recent example was a contest Jan. 6 at York's Ice Palace between the Yeomen and the University of Windsor Lancers. The Lancers were in last place in the Ontario University Athletic Association's weak western division. The Yeomen were the defending eastern division pennant champions and expected an easy win.

Instead the Lancers came within an ace of beating the Yeomen and the game was closely fought well into the third period. There are several more examples this season of traditionally weak Canadian clubs scoring upsets over the big eastern teams.

### PREMATURE CHEERS

Immediate reactions to this turn of events took the form of optimistic cheers from the west. "The west is catching up with the east," was the explanation of the happy western officials.

But closer study shows that the weaker teams are still playing the same hockey they were five years ago. It's more accurate to say the parity is due to a decline in the calibre of play by the stronger teams.

The reason for deterioration of the strong clubs is that the cream of young Canadian hockey talent is playing in other leagues. Jr. A leagues, which offer quick ascendancy to the professional ranks, are claiming a large proportion of these players while American universities take the rest.

The challenge for Canadian hockey talent from south of the border is almost unanswerable. American universities scout and recruit young Canadian players in midget and bantam leagues when they are only 10 to 14 — years old. They promise free education in a big time American university, a chance to play in beautiful arenas with exposure to thousands of people, and access to the pro leagues.

Canadian universities, in comparison, can offer no official athletic scholarships, minimum exposure in small arenas, and little chance of access to a professional career.

### EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES

Access to professional ranks has become a critical consideration in recent years with the expansion of the National Hockey League from six to sixteen teams and the birth of the World Hockey Association. This has meant a virtual explosion of opportunities for players to earn inflated salaries in a talent-starved hockey community.

As opportunities for professional play have expanded, the practical importance of a university degree has diminished. Today a graduate of junior hockey has a greater chance for financial success than a university graduate.

So as the best college players flee to the junior leagues and American universities, the top Canadian universities are finding themselves with depleted rosters. The Varsity Blues, for example, have less than half the players with Jr. A experience they had two years ago. The disintegration of college hockey is hard to hide from the fans. In recent years the University of Western Ontario Mustangs were drawing 1,500 fans for home contests at the Gardens in London. This year they are averaging less than 200.

Ironically the number of young men playing hockey is increasing and the calibre of junior play today is vastly superior to what it was before. How many Gil Perraults, Rick Martins and Guy Lafleurs came out of junior ranks in previous years? The same expanding professional opportunities which are attracting the talent to the junior ranks and American universities is depleting the rosters of Canadian universities.

### OPTIMISM

One man who doesn't feel the Canadian college hockey situation is as bleak as it seems is the coach of the York Yeomen, Dave Chambers. In a recent interview with Excalibur, Chambers listed several reasons for his optimism:

"Fewer Canadian boys are going to American colleges on scholarships, to begin with," said Chambers. "Within the next five years a much smaller percentage of Canadians will be going to the States because Americans are playing better and pressure is being put on American colleges to play more American boys."

"Within ten years," the coach predicted, "there won't be any Canadian players on scholarships in the States."

"And when you look at it, this is where Canadian universities have been hit the worst. It wasn't the Jr. A players or the professional hopefuls that were leaving, but the good Canadian college players."

"Now these boys will be staying home. There have been a number of rule changes in the States aimed at eliminating Canadians from college competition. All Jr. A players, and any players receiving other than expense money for their services will be ineligible."



Harry Kitz photo

"Also, any Canadian boy who plays after his nineteenth year in a hockey league loses a year of eligibility in the States. This rule doesn't apply to Americans."

### CHANGING SCENE

"A good indication of how things are changing was seen in the NCAA finals last year where Cornell was the only team with all Canadians on its roster. Wisconsin, Boston U., and Denver all had more than one-half Americans."

"Three years ago all players in the tournament would have been Canadian."

Chambers also pointed to all the Jr. A talent in Canada and explained that college hockey will pick up a share of it.

"Where is a Jr. A player going to play if he doesn't turn pro?" asked the coach. "Sr. A or college hockey are the only alternatives."

And how does Canadian college hockey compare to Sr. A.? Chambers pointed to a recent international tournament held in Ontario between several Sr. A clubs and teams from Russia, Czechoslovakia and Sweden.

"The Sr. A teams were turning to college squads for reinforcement in that tournament," Chambers explained. "For example four of our boys; John Hirst, Al Avery, Barry Jenkins, and Doug Dunsmuir played for Kingston. There were also four players from Sir George Williams University on the team."

"Herb Smith, the manager of Kingston, told us that they were turning to college players because they were in condition and practised every day."

"So obviously the college leagues can be considered a very good training grounds for hockey players," concluded the coach.

But surely the Canadian college leagues are suffering now from a dearth of good hockey talent, Excalibur said. What has gone wrong and what can be done about it?

"Boys play hockey because they enjoy it, they want to perfect their skills, and they want the team atmosphere; if you want to go through all the social reasons," said Chambers.

"I also do believe that they like to feel that they are supported when they play. In other words, they like to feel they have fan support."

### BUSINESS OF SCHOLARSHIPS

"College hockey has to be made a place where good hockey players like to play. We don't have scholarships and that's why a boy may go elsewhere."

Should Canadian universities get into the scholarship business? Co-ordinator of athletics at York, Nobby Wirkowski says no. Wirkowski cited many reasons for keeping Canadian universities out of this field.

"We don't want to get involved in the system of scholarships as it is in the States," said Wirkowski. "What it ends up with is a

bidding system between universities for a player's service."

The athletic co-ordinator went on to explain that Canadian universities want to keep away from the scholarship business because too many things can happen, and too many controls are necessary.

Third party scholarships are welcome in Canadian colleges, though, explained Wirkowski, with reference to the Hockey Canada program.

"In these cases the student can still attend the university of his choice while receiving the scholarship."

But university scholarships are quite costly, he explained. In the States, colleges take in large gate receipts at home games, so they can afford a scholarship program. Many athletic systems are self-sustaining in American colleges, he further pointed out.

### CANADIAN INCENTIVES

So if we are not going to offer scholarships, what can we offer the good Canadian hockey players to stay here?

"Give them the best possible coaching, equipment and facilities," suggests coach Chambers, "and the opportunity to perfect their skills — this is the aim of any athletic program."

"If money is the reason that the boys are going elsewhere then there is nothing Canadian colleges can do about it."

"You've got to supply them with good facilities. Very few schools have their own rinks. We're getting there — Queen's has a beautiful new arena, for example. Toronto always had a rink and this is why they've always had good teams."

"Good competition is essential," he further suggested. "We have to get the best possible schedule for our team. We would like to play the best possible teams in our exhibition schedule, for example Boston U., Cornell, the Russians. By setting up a top schedule we will attract better players."

Chambers also spoke of competition within the league. There are presently some teams in the OUAA that are playing above their heads, like Ryerson, Brock and Windsor.

"We've got to equalize competition within the league," said the coach. "There should be a division set up for better teams and one for weaker clubs. The bottom two teams then could drop into the second division the next season and be replaced in the top division by the best two teams from the weaker division if they wish. This is a system they use in Europe."

"To sum up, facilities — all schools must have their own rinks with seating capacity; coaching, although the coaching in Canada is just as good if not better than in the States where recruiting is a large part of college game; competition; and publicity — the players must feel that this is a good place to play, are what's needed to strengthen the ranks of Canadian college hockey."



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