



WHAT DOES IT TAKE?

INSIDE HOCKEY SCOUTING



The odds are not good. In fact, they're dismal. So dismal, that it's not uncommon to hear people in the hockey industry say, "You have a better shot at winning the lottery than making it in the NHL." That's right, folks. Making it to the pros is harder than winning millions of dollars.

But it's not impossible. And like everything in life, there are ways to improve your - or your child's - chances if you take the right steps. We recruited a team of six scouting experts to not only tell you what those steps are, but also what they're really looking for.



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1. Typically at what age do you start to take talent seriously?

(DD) Parents who make a commitment to their child's development as a hockey player at an early age give their child the best chance of developing their talents and enjoying success. How much training they do, the quality of coaching they get and how quickly they develop physically all factor into the rate at which they develop as hockey players. Talent is only one piece of the puzzle when it comes to being successful, and to develop talent can take years and years of practice and dedication.

(KS) They begin to scout and assess the kids by age 14 and now the agents are trying to sign kids at Bantam, or 14 years.

(MK) I believe that it should be the parent's goal to allow kids to experiment with different sports and arts. A 'AAA' hockey player in the 7-13 age group will change tremendously over those years. And it is the 'AA' and 'A' kids that have learned to improve their hockey skills by honing their performance in other sports. I believe that a hockey player who plays soccer in the spring/summer will compete equally with the hockey player who plays hockey all year round. It may take a month to catch up, but I have never seen a kid that ranks in the bottom third of the hockey team in ability get to the top third of the team by training all summer. To that end, I think that kids should begin to develop a passion for their most desired sport around the age of 13 to 14.

(DG) When scouts evaluate players for the National Hockey League, the most important year is when the player is turning 18 years old. This is the first year a player will be draft eligible for the NHL. We also make a point of noticing players at 17 years of age and, occasionally, at 16 years of age, so that we know who to really concentrate on in their initial draft year. Others in the industry may try to determine this at an earlier age, but the younger you scout a player, the harder it is to determine how that player may develop.

(MD) Typically, I start to take talent seriously at around Peewee/Minor Bantam. Talent is noticed at as early as Minor Atom, but, at such a young age, that talent is more of a head start for a player. At around Peewee/Minor Bantam, when players are 12-14 years of age, players are in their second and third years of contact, and are also going through puberty and growing. That is when you really start to take a player's talent seriously.



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-Dion Del Monte

2. What trends have emerged in scouting as a result of the new rules in the NHL?

(IT) Simple – everyone needs to be able to skate. Without hooking and holding, players need to be quick and agile on their skates.

(DD) Players with weaker skating skills can no longer use hooking and holding to level the playing field against more skilled competition. Being a good skater is a must in today's game. Players have begun training both on and off the ice with the specific goal of improving speed, agility and quickness. Coaches are looking for players who have the skating ability to excel in this environment. This means smaller players with great skill and quickness can succeed. It also means that bigger players can't rely on their size and strength alone and have become quicker and more mobile as a result.

(MK) Quite simply, the game's speed has increased. Size is not as significant of a factor as it had been in the mid 90s to early 2000s. Scouts are now focused on players that have more tools in their toolbox.

(DG) When the new rules in the NHL were established, the goal was to allow more skill to be prominent in our game. This has trickled down to how players are scouted. Players who are more skilled have developed a better

chance of playing at the pro level. This has put a stronger emphasis on these players in recent years. No matter what their size, if a player can skate well, has good puck skills and can play the game at a very fast pace, they will catch the eye of all scouts.

(MD) Today's game is a much faster and more skilled game than it ever has been. With the development of technology, new equipment and sticks, and the advancement of dryland training, today's hockey players have made the game a fast-paced sport. Going hand-in-hand with that, the NHL has developed new rules to cut down on the amount of obstruction in the game, allowing for players to demonstrate more speed and skill. As a result of this, smaller and more skilled players have been taken more often in the past few years.

3. Are there specific things that kids can do to help their chances? For example, is skating still the most important skill for kids to work on? Or, are there other skills, training and talents that should be focused on?

(IT) As I mentioned, skating is key. Certainly as players get older, proper off-ice training will help their on-ice performance. Younger players need to focus on overall athleticism, namely their A,B,C's (Agility, Balance and Coordination).

(DD) Skating is the single most important skill a player needs. In today's game that it's very difficult to progress to the next level without being a strong skater. Practicing incorrect form over and over will only make it harder to correct the problems, so it's important that a player learns proper technique while young. That said, players at all ages and levels of play can get help to polish their technique and learn to become more powerful and efficient.

Off-ice training, focusing particularly on developing a strong core and lower body strength, will help players become more stable on their skates and help them produce more power in each stride. It also helps players prevent injuries before they occur. Younger players can learn simple body weight exercises that improve the single leg balance and strength required for efficient, powerful strides and quick lateral movement.

(KS) All elite players are usually good skaters and very skilled, but the problem is the lack of understanding of the game. We have many highly talented players, but they do not know how to play the game. The exceptional players have the hockey sense, which separates them from the rest. No one can teach hockey sense, but you can teach them the game.

(MK) Yes you can do more; more stamina and more strength will allow you to skate a bit faster and shoot a bit harder, but parents need to realize that all the extra training young athletes partake in will result in a 2-3 percent gain on the rest of your peers before the age of 14. At the OHL level and beyond, that gain is even smaller because every other athlete is training like you.

(MD) Without any doubt, skating is still the most important thing for kids to work on. It doesn't matter what position you play or what role you play, whether you're a goal-scorer, playmaker or fighter, you need to know how to skate. Nobody has ever been called "too good of a skater," there is no such thing. From Minor Atom to the NHL, players of all ages continually work on their skating every year.

Having said that, there are many things that young players can do to help their chances. To go along with skating, enrolling in figure skating for at least a year is a great way to work on your edges and balance on your skates. A player like Jeff Skinner of the Carolina Hurricanes shows that. Dryland training is another thing young players can do to help their chances.

Improving their speed and strength off the ice will result in speed and strength improvements on the ice, which helps a player in many aspects on the ice: skating, puck control, balance on skates, body contact, ability to give and receive hits, shot, etc. Lastly, working with a puck is always important for young players. Practicing their shot and stickhandling will benefit them greatly.

4. Is it genetics or training? Why are some kids better than other kids when given the same opportunities?

(IT) Certainly genetics play a role, but effort, dedication and willpower are what differentiates most players.

(DD) Genetics no doubt play a role in determining a player's success, but the quantity and quality of the training a player receives is just as important. Work ethic is also an important factor. The best players are the ones with 'good' genes, but who also put in the time to train and have the opportunity to learn from experience and knowledgeable coaches.

LIKE IT OR NOT, GENETICS (GOD GIVEN TALENT) PLAY A HUGE ROLL IN YOUR CHANCES OF MAKING IT TO THE NHL. DO YOU THINK WALTER GRETZKY TRAINED HIS OTHER SONS THE SAME WAY AS WAYNE WAS TAUGHT? MY ANSWER WOULD BE YES.

-Mike Kennedy, Sports Training Academy

(KS) The elite or exceptional players are born with it, but they still need to continue to develop their skills and skating, and most importantly learn how to play with the team. Training can help others improve without a doubt, but if they don't understand the game, their chances of making it drop dramatically.

(MK) Like it or not, genetics (God given talent) play a huge roll in your chances of making it to the NHL. Do you think Walter Gretzky trained his other sons the same way as Wayne was taught? My answer would be yes. Hockey is not unlike mathematics. Some kids just get it. The game is fast and the better players see the game slower than the weaker players. The timing of their muscles to the brain is quicker and they are able to make things happen with tiny windows of opportunity. You can train as hard as you want and you will get a little edge on your competitor, but the interesting

thing about hockey is that hockey smarts is a tough thing to teach.

5. What can kids do to get themselves looked at? Are certain leagues scouted more closely and are certain positions in higher demand right now?

(IT) We have really seen the position of goaltender evolve over the past 15 years from technique, to training, to the equipment they wear. The role of the defencemen has also evolved, requiring agility and quickness with the speed of the forecheck. The ability to make a quality play out of your own end is crucial.

(KS) There are two main routes for Canadians who are trying to make it to the NHL. One is the CHL, a component of which is the OHL (Ontario Hockey League). The other is to play Provincial Jr. A or for a prep school to earn a hockey scholarship to the U.S.

(MK) Try to find a coach that will allow players to have freedom and be able to showcase individual skill. In terms of leagues, the OHL and the USHL (United States Hockey League) offer the best two ways to go pro and to college, respectively. Secondly, be able to deke effectively - if you want to get noticed, undress a defenceman.

Also, it's important to keep in mind that pro and OHL coaches teach systems, but too often our youth players are bogged down by effective systems at the sacrifice of skill plays. Higher risk plays need to be developed and encouraged.

(DG) There's no magic answer as to where you should play to be noticed. Certainly the leagues with the highest level of play get more attention because more players are likely to possess the skill level to play as a pro. However, when you consider the amount of scouting and the technology involved, the old adage of, "if you're good enough we will find you" really holds true. It's always best for a player to go where he will develop the most and be able to sustain his passion to continue playing the game.

When it comes to the position you play, there's always a need for all players. The timing may not be right if the team is flush with goalies and that's the position you play, but no one position is ever consistently in more demand than another.

(MD) As a young player, you need to play a complete game. To get yourself noticed, you need to show your

speed, skill, smarts and determination with the puck. Show that you can play in any zone of the rink, with or without the puck. While doing all of these things, there is one league - in my opinion - in which a player is more likely to be noticed, that is the GTHL (Greater Toronto Hockey League). The GTHL is the most scouted league in Ontario and drafts the most players to the OHL.

6. What is the significance of systematic coaching? Are hockey systems developmental or confusing?

(IT) For younger players, without a doubt, the focus should be on fundamental skills development. However, hockey is a team game and players need to understand how to use their skills, how to transfer them into a game. This is where there is disconnect. Coaches need to look at their programs and, like schools, have a curriculum, where, at certain ages, specific skills, tactics and strategies are progressively taught. Hockey Canada has done a fantastic job in creating these types of resources for coaches.

(DD) Hockey is a team game so it's important that players learn to work together. This means teaching systems so that each player knows his or her responsibilities in different situations. Once players reach a certain skill level, coaches can start to implement basic team systems like breakouts and forechecks, so players don't simply follow the puck. Learning to 'think' the game and recognize plays before they develop is an important aspect in moving from one level to the next. Systems may be confusing to begin with, but as is the case with skating or puck handling, players eventually catch on and begin using the systems without consciously thinking about them.

(DG) The answer to both of these questions is: It really depends on the coach. The timing and the complexity of systems and hockey can make it either developmental or confusing. It is always important to develop the skating ability and skills to play first. Implementing systems should be done at a gradual level on an ongoing basis. The combination of skating, skills and good systems, all developed at the right pace, make for the most complete player.

To find out what our scouting experts had to say about the significance of off ice training, visit us at:

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