

Producing elite U.S. players starts at bottom

By John Buccigross
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The United States has 24 NHL teams and more than 307 million people within its borders. With those numbers, the U.S. should be producing a healthy number of highly skilled, physically tough hockey players... more than it is today.

The 2000s have had some positive signs for hockey in the U.S. In the past 11 NHL drafts, six of the overall No. 1 picks were Canadian, two were Russian and three were American (Rick DiPietro, Erik Johnson and Patrick Kane). Team USA's excellent play at the Olympics last February was not a fluke. It was reinforcement that they should not have been such big underdogs. The NHL pool of players born in the U.S. is deeper in quality than Russia, Sweden and every other country but mighty Canada. While lacking elite NHL players, the U.S. has produced plenty of really good players. But, it should be producing more. And it should have more elite-level players.

Among the 711 players on the NHL's 2010-11 opening night rosters, 146 of them (20.5 percent) were born in the United States, according to the NHL. This number represents the highest U.S.-born percentage ever on the NHL's early season rosters. In the 1983-84 season, the percentage of American-born players in the NHL was 13 percent. The year before the 2004-05 lockout, the percentage was 15.5 percent.

Twenty-five of the 50 states were represented on opening night, including non-traditional states such as California, Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina and Texas. In addition, more players from the state of New York (23) appeared on rosters than from Russia (22), and the New York state total matched that of Finland. The number of U.S. born players is growing and should continue to grow. This is why I have been an advocate of hockey in some non-traditional places and am against contraction. I think NHL teams produce more NHL fans, more youth hockey participants and, ultimately, more U.S. born NHL players. That being said, if the NHL continues to analyze its data and finds that markets like Phoenix, Miami and Tampa are not increasing interest in hockey, especially among youths, the league is wasting its time and forgoing more revenue in another Canadian market or a better U.S. market. (I would also be in favor of expanding the NHL to another Canadian market and another U.S. market and having eight divisions of four teams like the NFL.)

The 20 percent total of U.S. born NHL players is strong but should be higher and include more elite players. Patrick Kane is the highest skilled player of the lot, and he is tied for 18th in points. (Kane finished ninth in points last year.)

Bobby Ryan is probably next with his all-around speed, skill and great size. He could grow into an elite winger over the next five years. Ryan will be right there among the U.S. born goal-scoring leaders at season's end and might develop into a top 10 NHL scoring leader, but right now he is tied for 25th. Phil Kessel has mad skill but needs help. Zach Parise is probably the best two-way American-born player right now -- when healthy. Parise was tied for 15th in points last year and fifth the year before.

The U.S. does have a strong goaltending crew. Ryan Miller, Tim Thomas, Jimmy Howard and Jonathan Quick are legitimate No. 1 starters. Before his injury, Colorado's Craig Anderson was certainly an upper tier goalie. Brent Johnson is having an outstanding year in Pittsburgh. Jack Campbell, born in Michigan, was the first goalie (11th overall by Dallas) taken in the 2010 NHL draft. This is one position where the U.S. is even with Canada.

Youth Hockey Participation

About 20 percent of the NHL is U.S. born, but the United States is second to only Canada in registered youth players.

Federation	Jr./Youth
Canada	325,432
United States	293,691
Russia	58,257
Sweden	41,104
Finland	36,411
Czech Republic	32,623
Germany	17,817
Switzerland	13,709
Slovakia	6,497
Norway	3,934

Source: USA Hockey

So, what needs to be done to keep the U.S. hockey numbers growing, retention levels high and production of elite players increasing? One way is to peruse "[My 13 simple rules for hockey parents everywhere](#)," which I introduced last year. This year, I added two new rules to the list:

- Play with your kid. Your kid gets better at practice, not when playing games. They are better off missing a game than missing a practice. A lot of kids don't get one shot on goal or handle the puck for more than 60 seconds during a game. Keep this mentality when your kids are young. Don't worry how many games are on the schedule. Ask them if they want to go to public skate and just let them go skate with their friends. Play street hockey or knee hockey with your kid. They will love it and they will develop better hands. It is the same as the baseball parent who signs his kid up for baseball and never plays catch with them for even just five to 10 minutes a day. It's simple. I do a drill with our goalies where I grab a bucket of pucks and throw them like baseballs to their glove side one after the other. Relax and catch it. We had a goalie that snatched at the puck instead of catching it. By telling him to relax and catch the puck instead of grabbing it, his glove hand improved within five minutes and he is making glove saves in games now that he wasn't making a month ago.
- Do not practice at 5 a.m. This cliché went out with Trivial Pursuit and Charo. Practice might still be early for learn to skate and some in-house programs, but it continually gets better as your kid ages and it's really awesome when he turns 16 and can drive himself to practice. If you want to go to one of the elite travel programs and pay out the nose and travel all over the place, fine. But in 99 percent of the cases, you are probably nuts until they are at least a teenager. The cost? I believe no sport values and depends on good teammates more than hockey. Hockey is a difficult game. Nothing comes cheap. Obstacles are everywhere. It requires stamina, toughness, creativity and strength. The lazy have no chance for success. The selfish are a poison. But when teammates work together, success can be had. And because it is so difficult and rare to succeed, to score and to really love, the exhilaration is like few things in life. Tell your kid to dream and live for those moments. They are priceless.

Next, hunt down someone who thinks about this for a living and ask him some questions. That's what I did. On Sunday night, I had dinner with Kenny Rausch of USA Hockey and his wife, Melissa, to talk about this American hockey dream. This dinner with Rausch was good timing for me, as my 11-year-old son,

Jackson, had just completed an emotional Thanksgiving weekend hockey tournament in Newington, Conn., with his South Windsor Knights. They lost a chippy championship game filled with head shots, late shots, tripping, hooking and holding. The final score was 5-2. Emotions and tensions ran high.

I help coach Jack's Pee Wee team and am always looking for ways to help the players on the team and Jack improve their work ethic, creativity, skill and love of the game, while managing the emotions of game day. We advocate taking reasonable chances and constantly praise smart and competitive hockey. Rausch joined the USA Hockey staff full time in July 2009 as manager of youth hockey. In this position, Rausch supports the organization's youth programs and initiatives to further develop hockey in the United States using, among other things, the American Development Model. The ADM provides age-appropriate guidelines and curricula to hockey associations across America to help more kids play, love and excel in hockey.

As a player, Rausch was a four-year member of Boston University's team from 1991 to 1995. He was a part of the 1995 team that won the NCAA national championship in Providence, R.I. (I covered that game working for a local Providence TV station), the Hockey East regular-season title and the Hockey East tournament, as well as the Beanpot, where Rausch was named the Beanpot Most Valuable Player. Rausch was a four-year member of the Hockey East All-Academic Team and was a Hockey East Distinguished Scholar Award winner. He has a pet dog, yes a Terrier, named Deke. Great dog name, Deke.

Cue the Q-and-A with USA Hockey's Kenny Rausch

Bucci: Why don't you think there are more highly skilled American players in the NHL?

Rausch: I would say that the adult model has been superimposed on youth sports way too often in America. What I mean by that is winning is becoming more important at the young ages (10-14). It makes my skin crawl to hear coaches say to kids at that age, "Get it out!" or "Get it in!" We need to be teaching kids stick skills, how to make plays, how to be decisive and how to be aggressive on the puck.

Bucci: What are other countries doing differently to produce highly skilled hockey players?

Rausch: Even Canada is trying to make changes like USA Hockey is. Other countries foster the skill environment more and better. [Brendan Morrison](#) tells the story of him playing in Sweden during the lockout. The first time he turned the puck over and returned to the bench he was waiting to hear it from the coach. Nothing. Then another turnover later in the game. Still nothing from the coach. Their coaches, even at the young ages, are not only more tolerant; they are typically their better coaches. Their better coaches coach at the younger ages and want to develop skill and foster that environment where kids enjoy the game and want to come back and play more. As a result, their retention is better and they keep their better players longer.

Bucci: What do other countries specifically do to enhance and develop skill that you feel grassroots USA Hockey should be doing?

Rausch: The big thing is small area games. Most people refer to them as cross ice hockey that we are trying to refer to as "Red, White and Blue" hockey. We are trying to institute it until the age of 8. Over in Europe and most places, they do it until age 10 or 12. If you took the average adult player and asked him to skate the length of the ice, it would be 15 or 16 strides. If you took a Mite and asked him or her to skate crossboard to crossboard it would be about 15 to 16 strides. It's ludicrous that that little kid is playing full ice hockey. We should be playing more stuff in small areas, teaching our kids to make decisions quicker, faster, protect more pucks and make more plays in traffic. If they can do it at age 8, 9 or 10, then they will be able to do it at 16, 17 and 18. We refer to Mite (8 and under) and Squirt (9 and 10) hockey as "breakaway hockey." The best player gets the puck at the blue line and skates 180 feet straight down the ice with no pressure on him and takes a shot on net. That's not real hockey.

Bucci: What is USA Hockey's philosophy on checking and how it develops skilled hockey players?

Rausch: I've just been a part of a subcommittee that is heavily involved in the checking issue. And my observation talking to medical people and hockey people is that more hockey contact should be introduced younger whereas full-out body checking should be delayed until Bantams (ages 13 and 14). When I say body contact, I mean, watch a women's Olympic hockey game -- it's pretty physical and there's a lot of contact involved. But, there is never that check that is intended to intimidate, blow a kid up, knock him off his skates or in football terms "de-credit" someone. That is, unfortunately, what most kids and coaches start to associate checking with. And that's not checking. Checking is an art and science to separate a puck carrier from the puck. And if you start playing Red, White and Blue small area hockey at a younger age, people are going to bump into each other by accident because there is less room out there. The more they do that the more used to body contact they are going to get and as they get older, they will be fine when full body checking is introduced later. We don't want less contact. We want more contact but less violent contact.

Our biggest reason why we want to delay full checking is not just because of the medical issue, although safety is our No. 1 concern, but it's also the skill issue. What we have learned through long-term athletic development is that there are certain windows of trainability. At ages 10 to 12, the biggest window of trainability is skill acquisition and if a kid is either concerned only with hitting or avoiding being hit are we developing skill? Doctors have told us that an 11-year-old brain cannot fully comprehend how to avoid a check and make a play at the same time. So if they can't do that at 11, why are we having full checking?

Bucci: What advice would you give youth hockey coaches on running practices to develop skill?

Rausch: The more stuff you can do in a small area the better. Watch how the NHL is played today. Watch college. Watch how an NHL team practices. They don't do much full ice stuff, and they have way more players on the ice than a Squirt A or Pee Wee B team. Pee Wee teams that think they need full ice to practice with 14 kids is ludicrous. You are wasting half the ice if not more and kids are standing around for 75 percent of the practice. Kids who practice half ice or station based practices get way more activity compared to full ice practices. Station based practices result in close to 60 percent more touches, skating time, passes and shots. Do that over the course of a season and you are almost cramming two seasons into one as development goes.

Bucci: What is your forecast for USA Hockey over the next five to 10 years from grassroots to international to NHL?

Rausch: What we are seeing right now is that our retention rates are poor. Close to 60 percent of kids drop out of hockey by the time they are 14. The adult model superimposed on kids is putting too much pressure to win. I oversee a whole Pee Wee division, and I notice our house kids smile a whole lot more than our travel kids. They have more fun playing because there is less pressure. They don't get screamed at by the parents and they have more fun playing. So I think with the ADM being implemented across the country with Red, White and Blue hockey up until 8 years old and with small area practices, I think more kids will stay in the game longer. We preach "More, Better, Longer." I think that is going to happen, which in turn will be a great impact on our international success. The ADM is designed and backed monetarily by the NHL to develop elite players for the NHL. Twenty percent of the NHL is U.S. born. That's a sin when you look at the population of hockey players in the United States. We are second only to Canada and blow everyone else out of the water. For us to have only 20 percent is ludicrous. We should have 30-40 percent U.S. born players in the NHL. And hopefully, 10 years from now that will be the case.

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