

Producing elite U.S. players starts at bottom

By John Buccigross
ESPN.com

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.

