

STRAIGHT FACTS ABOUT MAKING IT IN PRO HOCKEY

An analysis of "What Hockey *Doesn't* Have to Offer"

By Jim Parcels - January 1999

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What are the chances of making it in professional hockey? Does it matter where my son plays minor hockey if he has professional or collegiate hockey aspirations?

Those are questions that are asked every year by parents, players and coaches alike across the minor hockey community.

As an employee of the Ontario Minor Hockey Association (OMHA) I have had the opportunity to work with the largest grass roots hockey organization in the world. It is a position that has allowed me to analyze the minor programs of over 300 associations in southern Ontario as well as other local programs across the country.

Working the past three years with the OMHA has led me to ask parents what they really think the game is for. Is minor hockey provided as an avenue to the National Hockey League? Is minor hockey designed to develop players who are aspiring to attain a hockey scholarship? Was minor hockey designed to develop skills, community spirit and teamwork? Is it for the development of individuals' well being and character? Is it about learning how to win and lose?

I have found in my experience that many parents feel that there is some sort of "pot of gold" at the end of the hockey rainbow that involves a huge signing bonus, a hockey card contract and their son's action figure on a Sega Genesis video game. Most parents will tell you it isn't, however a vocal minority believe there is supposed to be a financial paradise, provided by hockey, at age 20.

Believe me, that paradise just isn't there.

What people within minor hockey never see is the actual cold, hard facts related to "turning pro" or "getting noticed" that get distorted every day by recruiters, managers and coaches. It happens in both minor and junior hockey.

It amazes me of the stories that I have heard about organizations attempting to acquire the services of minor hockey players, some as young as the age of 7 or 8 living in communities 1-3 hours from those teams. Perks such as guaranteed ice time, video games, bicycles, jackets, track suits and that never ending "exposure" term that gets parents heads spinning. Those organizations will tell you anything to get your services just to fill a roster spot on their team because there are dozens of other teams out there competing to tell you the same thing.

Recruiters love painting the rosy picture at the "front door" with promises of exposure and elite instruction. What very few people think of is the not so rosy picture at "back door" of the development process for the 99.999% that pass through minor or junior hockey systems without guaranteed financial returns.

As a former employee of two Ontario Hockey League franchises (Peterborough Petes and Guelph Storm) I had a first-hand opportunity to see how the top of the development triangle in this province worked for players.

The OHL is considered the number one breeding ground for junior players aspiring to play professional hockey and rightfully so. The OHL provides an excellent opportunity to combine high caliber hockey with educational opportunities between the ages of 16-20. I would strongly recommend any player who has the opportunity to play in the OHL to do so.

In 1989 when I joined the Petes' as a 20-year old Trainer, I saw the pictures of Yzerman, Gainey, Redmond, and Jarvis adorning the walls of the dressing room. The Petes are reputed as the number one organization in the world for producing players for the NHL. The first thing I thought was "Wow, all the guys in this dressing room this year are going to the NHL!"

Boy, was I wrong.

After two years as Trainer for the Petes, I moved onto a Marketing position for the Guelph Storm. Over five years I witnessed first hand approximately 250 players who played or tried out with the two major junior teams. Some players moved onto pro and collegiate careers while others moved into the mainstream workforce. Five years later

I got thinking; “How many of those players received some sort of financial return or end result on their investment of 15-20 years into the game of minor and junior hockey?”

Of the 38 players who went through the Petes dressing room in two years, only four ever played in the NHL and only two are still there on a regular basis today.

That got me thinking: If the odds are that slim for the number one team in the world for putting players in the NHL, what are the odds for players in the dressing rooms of the Mississauga Senators Atoms, North Bay Athletics Bantams, Waterloo Tigers Minor Peewees, Markham Islanders Novices or Etobicoke Canucks Bantams?

Hence the reason for my study:

In 1995 when I returned to college, I decided to begin writing a research paper on “The Chances of Making It in Pro Hockey for Ontario Minor Hockey players”. During my research I accessed the various OHL Draft lists, rosters and pro and college statistics from 1989 through to the 1996 season and found some very sobering facts that all parents, players and coaches alike should be aware of.

The only accurate way to measure the chances of making the “pros” is to take an actual “birth year” as a sample category. Since hockey's competitive structure is based on the age of players, this approach is the only accurate way of taking a sample group.

In my research I utilized the birth year “1975” as a sample. This included all players active in minor and junior hockey in the province between the years 1988-1991. After collecting registration information from the Ontario Minor Hockey Association (OMHA), Northern Ontario Hockey Association (NOHA), Metro Toronto Hockey League (MTHL) and Hockey Development Centre for Ontario (HDCO), the approximate number of players active in Ontario in 1991, born in 1975, was roughly 22,000!

That total doesn't include approximately 7,500 players who left the game through attrition from Tyke to Bantam who were also born in 1975. Therefore, there were about 30,000 players who played minor hockey at one time or another in this province who had "1975" birth dates. That creates a sample group of 30,000 players, born in 1975, for which this study is based.

For the players born in 1975 the Ontario Hockey League draft was held in 1991 (for underage Bantams born in 1975) and 1992 for the "open" Midget draft year.

Remember too, that many NHL scouts considered the “1975” group of players in Ontario the strongest of any crop ever to come out of the province.

In the 1991 and 1992 OHL Drafts, there were 232 Ontario developed players selected by the 16 major junior teams (at that time). The following breakdown shows how those 30,000 players active that year “progressed”.

👤 Out of those 232 players drafted to the OHL, only 105 ever played one game in the OHL!

👤 Out of those 105 players, only 90 finished their full 3-4 years of eligibility in the OHL

👤 Of those 22,000 players, only 41 played NCAA Division I hockey! Remember too that U.S. scholarships are not the large educational packages that have been offered by NCAA schools in the past (see below). The following players had either full or partial NCAA scholarships:

NCAA PLAYERS	Pos	Hometown	NCAA Div. I School
ANTOINE, Jamie	RW	Unionville	Union College
BATTAGLIA, Doug	LW	Barrie	RPI
BRAGNALO, Chris	D	Thunder Bay	New Hampshire
BREZAVICH, Dan	G	Thunder Bay	Colgate
CANCELLI, Rob	LW	Mississauga	Dartmouth
CARAVAGGIO, Lucio	G	Etobicoke	Michigan Tech
CHEESEMAN, Jeff	C	Minden	Lake Superior State
CHYZ, John	RW	Bradford	Yale

COUSINEAU, Dan	LW	Waterloo	Ohio State
CRAIGEN, Joe	C	Kitchener	Harvard
CRESSMAN, Matt	LW	Cambridge	Western Michigan
CROWLEY, Brian	RW	Markham	Brown
DILLABOUGH, Travis	C	Mississauga	Providence
DiPASQUO, Al	C	S.S. Marie	Ohio State
EBARE, Keith	RW	S.S. Marie	Bowling Green
FAWCETT, Chris	RW	Gloucester	U. Massachusetts
GARROW, Mike	D	Kenora	Maine
HALFNIGHT, Ashlin	D	Toronto	Harvard
HARRISON, Dan	F	Newmarket	Ohio State
HUSTLER, John	D	Cobourg	Bowling Green
JAKOPIN, John	D	Toronto	Merrimack
JONES, Caley	RW	Chatham	Western Michigan
LAROCHE, Martin	C	Cornwall	Merrimack
LEGG, Mike	RW	London	U. Michigan
MAIDMENT, Ben	D	Smiths Falls	Clarkson
McCULLOUGH, Keith	F	Thunder Bay	Yale
MELAS, Mike	C	Thornhill	Western Michigan
NICHOLISHEN, Mike	D	Mississauga	U. Mass-Lowell
O'GRADY, Tom	C	Brampton	Merrimack
PAGNUTTI, Matt	D	Sudbury	Clarkson
PAPP, Jamie	LW	London	Cornell
RICHARDS, Chris	C	Cornwall	Ohio State
ROY, Jimmy	RW	Sioux Lookout	Michigan Tech
SAVAGE, Andre	C	Orleans	Michigan Tech
SEGUIN, Kevin	C	St. Marys	Bowling Green
SUTTON, Andy	LW	Kingston	Michigan Tech
TAPPER, Bryan	D	Scarborough	RPI
TATE, Adam	D	Kanata	Maine
TURCO, Marty	G	S.S. Marie	U. Michigan
WHITCHURCH, Jed	C	St. Thomas	Colgate
WHITE, Todd	C	Kanata	Clarkson

👤 What should also be known is that full scholarships to Canadian players are almost non-existent today. The U.S. is developing hockey players at an incredible rate and when it comes time to recruit, NCAA schools are offering their packages to American players. The number of Ontario players on full scholarship in the U.S. has dropped 63% in the past ten years!

👤 Scholarships too, are not "full" as many people tend to think. Canadian players are considered "out of state" and regular tuition for a player without scholarship ranges between \$25,000-40,000 U.S. per year. In most cases, Canadian players are on partial scholarships where only 40-60% of their education costs are covered. That means if you spend four years at an NCAA school, you may return home owing or having paid approximately \$50,000-75,000 U.S! Very few Canadian players today attain "full rides" to NCAA schools. Most NCAA teams only have 17 scholarships per team with approximately 30 players on their roster. Something has to give financially for a roster that big!

👤 What is disturbing, however, is out of those 41 NCAA players, very few *graduated* from their programs of study when they left their school! That begs the question: Why did they pursue an education through hockey if they have a minimal hockey future and no degree? With many hockey scholarships, 5th years are not covered by the school unless players are entering post graduate work study. So to finish their degree, players would have to dole out approx. \$25,000-40,000 to complete the degree at that school. Scholarships are also reviewed after each year, therefore if grades, part time work and hockey ability are not measuring up to school standards, the scholarship can be withdrawn at any time. Scholarships have also been withdrawn from players who have suffered serious injuries.

 Of the 90 players who finished their OHL careers and the 23 who played in the NCAA, only 48 were drafted to the NHL while four signed NHL free agent deals. This was best NHL draft result for any birth year in Ontario! This was also the last year the NHL had 12 rounds in their draft. Today there are only nine rounds! The following players were drafted by NHL teams and their current status:

NAME	Pos	Hometown	NHL Draft	As of 1999-2000 Season
ALLISON, Jamie	D	Whitby	CAL-2nd-1993	Has played 162 NHL games with Chicago & Calgary
ALLISON, Jason	C	North York	WAS-1st-1993	Has played 305 NHL games with Washington & Boston
ANDREWS, Jeff	LW	Oshawa	TOR-7th-1993	Spent 4 yrs. At CIAU U.New Brunswick, played 66 games in WPHL in 99-00
BERTUZZI, Todd	RW	Sudbury	NYI-1st-1993	Has played 326 NHL games with NY Islanders and Vancouver
BODKIN, Rick	C	Smithville	OTT-6th-1993	Last active in 95-96 in ECHL, played just two pro games
BRAND, Aaron	C	Toronto	TOR-FA-1997	Has spent four years with AHL St. John's Maple Leafs
BROWN, Brad	D	Mississauga	MTL-1st-1994	Has played 131 NHL games with Montreal & Chicago
COURVILLE, Larry	C	Timmins	WPG-5th-1993	Has played 33 NHL games with Vancouver, last two years in AHL
DILLABOUGH, Travis (NCAA)	C	Mississauga	LA-8th-1993	Has played 3 years in ECHL
DISHER, Jason	D	Belle River	OTT-8th-1993	Has played 300 minor pro games in AHL, IHL, ECHL, CoHL, WPHL with 8 teams
DONOVAN, Shean	RW	Timmins	SJS-2nd-1993	Has played 347 NHL games with Colorado, San Jose & Atlanta
GAGNON, Joel	G	Hearst	ANA-4th-1993	Played CIAU hockey U. Ottawa - deceased - auto accident - 1999
GRATTON, Chris	C	Brantford	TBY-1st-1993	Has played 526 NHL games with Tampa Bay & Philadelphia
GUIRESTANTE, John	RW	Toronto	NJY-5th-1993	Has played just 27 games in three minor pro seasons - UHL, ECHL, WPHL
HALFNIGHT, Ashlin (NCAA)	D	Toronto	HFD-9th-1994	Has spent two years in AHL with New Haven
HARVEY, Todd	C	Beverly Twp.	DAL-1st-1993	Has played 347 NHL games with Dallas, NY Rangers and San Jose
HILL, Kiley	LW	Val Caron	TBY-6th-1993	Spent CIAU hockey Laurentian U, played 3 years in ECHL, UHL
JAKOPIN, John (NCAA)	D	Toronto	DET-4th-1993	Has played 22 NHL games with Florida and 143 in AHL
JOHNSON, Matt	LW	Pelham	LA-2nd-1994	Has played 246 NHL games with LA Kings & Atlanta
LANG, Chad	G	Keswick	DAL-4th-1993	Has played 131 minor pro games five years - ECHL & WPHL
LEGG, Mike (NCAA)	RW	London	WAS-11th-1993	Played 1 yr. In Finland before spending past three years in WPHL & ECHL
LETANG, Alan	D	Renfrew	MTL-8th-1993	Played 8 NHL games with Dallas this year after 5 yrs in IHL, AHL & Germany
LINDROS, Brett	RW	Toronto	NYI-1st-1994	Played 51 NHL games with NY Islanders before retiring with concussions
MANLOW, Eric	C	Stirling	CHC-2nd-1993	Has played 6 seasons in minor pros in AHL, IHL & ECHL
McARTHUR, Mark	G	Peterborough	NYI-5th-1994	Played 4 years in IHL and AHL - 99-00 in Austria
MOORE, Barrie	LW	Lambeth	BUF-9th-1993	Has played 39 NHL games with Buffalo, Washington & Edmonton - 99-00 in AHL
MOREAU, Ethan	LW	Orillia	CHC-1st-1994	Has played 297 NHL games with Chicago & Edmonton
MOSS, Tyler	G	Nepean	TBY-2nd-1993	Has played 17 NHL games with Calgary - played 99-00 in IHL
MURRAY, Adrian	D	Ajax	WPG-8th-1993	Played CIAU hockey at U.New Brunswick
NAUSS, Ryan	LW	Oakville	TBY-8th-1993	Never played minor pro hockey after junior
NDUR, Rumun	D	St. Thomas	BUF-3rd-1994	Has played 69 NHL games with Buffalo, NY Rangers & Atlanta
O'DETTE, Matt	D	Oshawa	FLA-7th-1994	Has spent five years in minor pros in AHL & ECHL
POIRIER, Joel	LW	Richmond Hill	WAS-8th-1993	Spent four years in AHL & ECHL - 99-00 in Britain
RIVERS, Jamie	D	Ottawa	STL-3rd-1993	Has played 228 NHL games with St. Louis & NY Islanders
ROACH, Gary	D	S.S. Marie	NYR-5th-1993	Played 1 yr. In CIAU w/Laurentian U and last three in ECHL & UHL
ROCHE, Dave	LW	Peterborough	PIT-3rd-1993	Has played 179 NHL games with Pittsburgh & Calgary - 99-00 in AHL
ROY, Jimmy (NCAA)	RW	Sioux Lookout	DAL-10th-1994	Played 1 yr. With CDN Olympic team and past three in IHL
RUSK, Mike	D	Milton	CHC-9th-1993	Has played with 6 pro teams in 6 years in AHL, ECHL and CHL
SALAJKO, Jeff	G	Kitchener	SJS-10th-1993	Has played with 7 pro teams in 6 years in AHL, IHL, ECHL and CHL
STORR, Jamie	G	Brampton	LA-1st-1993	Has played 102 NHL games with LA Kings
SUTTON, Andy	D	Kingston	SJS-FA-1998	Has played 71 NHL games with San Jose
SWINSON, Wes	D	Peterborough	HAR-10th-1993	Has played with 8 pro teams in 4 years in AHL, IHL and ECHL
TOCHER, Ryan	D	Hamilton	QUE-4th-1993	Played 3 yrs. In CIAU w/ Brock U. - played '99-00 in ECHL
TURCO, Marty (NCAA)	G	S.S. Marie	DAL-5th-1994	Has spent two years in IHL
WASHBURN, Steve	C	Gloucester	FLA-3rd-1993	Has played 90 NHL games with Florida, Vancouver and Philadelphia
WEBB, Stephen	RW	Peterborough	NYI-FA-96	Has played 171 NHL games with NY Islanders - started pro career in UHL
WEEKES, Kevin	G	Scarborough	FLA-2nd-1993	Has played 78 NHL games with Florida, Vancouver & NY Islanders
WHITE, Todd (NCAA)	C	Kanata	CHC-FA-1997	Has played 46 NHL games with Chicago & Philadelphia
WILLIS, Jordan	G	Kincardine	DAL-10th-1993	Has played 1 NHL game with Dallas - currently playing in Britain
WILSON, Mike	D	Brampton	VAN-1st-1993	Has played 295 NHL games with Buffalo and Florida
WRIGHT, Shayne	D	Welland	BUF-11th-1994	Spent 4 yrs. In AHL before 1 yr. With CDN National team - 99-00 in Germany
YOUNG, Adam	LW	Toronto	NJY-6th-1995	Played two years in ECHL and AHL - no longer active

**** BOLD - has NHL exp.**

If you would like to follow the career paths of the players above, check out this website at www.hockeydb.com

🏒 Of those 48 drafted players (and four free agent signees), only 35 signed contracts with NHL teams.

🏒 Of those 35 signed, only 26 have seen action to date in an NHL game.

🏒 Of those 26, only 16 are currently active in the NHL (as of April 10, 2000). The low for the 1975 category active in the NHL was seven earlier in the 1998-99 season.

🏒 Of those 26 who have played an NHL game to date, research shows that only 14-16 will earn a second contract with an NHL team. About half of those players earning second contracts will see them finish that second contract with an NHL team. The remainder of the 50 draftees will toil in the minor pros in the IHL, AHL or ECHL or lower. The chances of players re-signing will increase slightly with the recent expansion of the NHL by four teams in the past two years.

🏒 Of those 30,000 players there were approximately 80 "1975" players active in Canadian University (CIAU) programs. Many of those players (about 75%) were former Major Junior (OHL, WHL, QMJHL) players who decided to pursue an education instead of minor pro deals. The others entered CIAU programs through Jr.B./Tier II or minor programs. The graduation rate from those programs by former major junior players from CIAU schools is approx. 50-60%. In the cases of many players from major junior, a portion of their tuition (ranging from \$1,000-5,000 per year of service in the league) is paid by their former major junior teams. This "education package" is usually reserved for players selected in the first 4-5 rounds of their junior league draft and are null and void if the player signs any professional hockey contract regardless of its amount.

However, of those players that turned pro through either NHL or the variety of minor pro leagues, the following is a breakdown of the average salary and the expected career length at each level:

NATIONAL HOCKEY LEAGUE (NHL)

16 current Ontario "1975" players

Avg. Career – 2.4 years

Avg. Initial Salary: \$220,000

** Original signing bonuses ranged between \$550,000 and \$750,000 for those nine players. These players are the lucky ones!

TIER TWO MINOR PRO

AMERICAN HOCKEY LEAGUE (AHL)

13 current Ontario "1975" players

Avg. Career – 3.5 years

Avg. Salary: \$40,000

INTERNATIONAL HOCKEY LEAGUE (IHL)

8 current Ontario "1975" players

Avg. Career – 3.3 years

Avg. Salary: \$40,000

TIER THREE MINOR PRO

EAST COAST HOCKEY LEAGUE (ECHL)

29 current Ontario "1975" players

Avg. Career – 3.1 years

Avg. Salary \$25,000

TIER FOUR MINOR PRO

UNITED HOCKEY LEAGUE (UHL)

Formerly Colonial Hockey League (CoHL)

5 current Ontario "1975" players

Avg. Career – 1.8 years

Avg. Salary \$16,000

CENTRAL HOCKEY LEAGUE (CHL)

8 current Ontario "1975" player

Avg. Career – 1.6 years

Avg. Salary \$18,000

WESTERN PROFESSIONAL HOCKEY LEAGUE (WPHL)

5 current Ontario "1975" players

Avg. Career – 1.5 years

Avg. Salary \$16,000

WEST COAST HOCKEY LEAGUE (WCHL)

2 current Ontario "1975" player

Avg. Career – 1.6 years

Avg. Salary \$20,000

Well, there you have it! This is the breakdown on a generation of players from Ontario who were in that elite group of players who "made it" and where they are today. Just imagine what the numbers are for some of the "weaker" birth years for Ontario. Some birth years like 1971 and 1968 had only 10-12 players see action in NHL games. The 1976 birth category has seen only nine skate on NHL ice to date.

Remember that this was the best year the province of Ontario yielded in the past dozen. Other birth years are much less fortunate than the "1975's"

Another factor to consider in pro hockey is the lifestyle. Yes, playing in the NHL for hundreds of thousands of dollars a year sounds tempting and attractive, but many players will tell you that the years fly by, living a lifestyle of airports, busses, hotels, apartments, late pay cheques, contract haggling, games every other night and the constant threat of trades. Many players in the minor pros live on a day-to day-basis with many fearful of picking up the phone and taking a call from their GM or Coach telling them to pack up their families and move on through a trade or waivers.

The average number of times a player gets traded, waived or signs with another team for a minor pro player is 3.5 times over the course of a 5-year career. That number increases once every two years after five years of service. There is a player that was with the Petes during my tenure in Peterborough who has played with 26 minor pro teams in five years! That didn't include the four junior teams he played for in three years in the OHL and the four Jr.B. teams he played with in two years!

The key development years for a player under an NHL contract is between the ages of 20-23. Usually players sign a 3-4 year contract with an NHL team that will see the player play in the American Hockey League (AHL) or International Hockey League (IHL) during that contract. Only 1 in 10 players drafted will see action in over 100 NHL games. Keep in mind that the NHL Players Pension does not kick in until 400 NHL games are played. The study also determined that for every year past the age of twenty, your chances of making the NHL are virtually cut in half in each succeeding season! Remember too, that there is a draft of new players each year looking to take your job!

What also has to be taken into account in all of this is the fact that these players have "benefited" from the massive pro hockey explosion. Just imagine what the odds were for players in the 1960's and 70's when there were more players active in minor hockey programs and less pro teams!

So next time you are considering where to play minor hockey for "development and exposure purposes" you can refer to this little gauge to see just where your child fits in. It's not as rosy as the picture painted at tryout season by managers and coaches of "alternative" minor hockey programs.

Where does all this lead us? What is the motivation for parents to go to the lengths they do to get their kid "noticed" in a minor hockey program? Why is it that 60% of Ontario players who currently play in the NHL played in

minor hockey programs below the A classification (i.e. BB, C, D, E etc.) in smaller rural towns?

Don't fall for the sales pitches like this that are constantly utilized to entice you to make a minor hockey move! Let the game take you as far as it can. Don't gamble your future on concentrating on hockey full time. Make the game part of your life, not a majority of it.

When considering junior hockey, remember to make hockey a priority right along side education. The Ontario Hockey League has an excellent record of producing pro players AND students and many of their clubs work hard at trying to keep those priorities straight.

In closing, I should point out that this story is in no way an attempt to dishearten or demoralize the dreams of children playing minor hockey because I know there are thousands who "Dream the Dream" every year. What this study does, however, is rationalize the system to educate parents and players on what "Hockey *Doesn't* Have to Offer."

It is neither an attempt to downgrade or diminish the efforts of junior programs in Ontario. It's just an eye opener for many parents, coaches, managers and recruiters who have an idea their player(s) are "long shots" but have never researched or been presented with the exact numbers.

Bottom line? Play minor hockey at home with your friends, go to school and concentrate on a career outside of hockey in addition to playing the game for fun! If you have a chance to play at a higher level in junior, take it, but don't expect it to be a ticket to the National Hockey League and throw out all educational and lifestyle concerns.

Don't sacrifice a normal family lifestyle trying to turn your 9-year old into a pro. He is up against a lot more in life at that age than having to deal with the pressure his parents put on him to become their possible retirement plan.

The thing that scares me about publishing a story like this is that there will be 5,000 parents out there that will read this and truly believe that their kid will buck the odds and be one of the "fortunate" dozen or so players.

That's what concerns me the most!