

The cost of ice hockey is freezing out young talent

Football and basketball have propelled many players from the humblest backgrounds to riches. Can ice hockey, dubbed “The Game of the Rich,” do the same?

All hail the chief

Johnny Bucyk rose from poverty to achieve a phenomenal career playing in Canada’s National Hockey League. Born in western Canada in 1935 to Ukrainian parents, Johnny Bucyk, affectionately nicknamed “Chief,” beat the odds when he achieved a glistening career in ice hockey playing for, not just one, but two NHL teams. An uncommon feat for a person of his social class, Johnny’s first ice rink was a fusion of his mother’s ingenuity with Mother Nature’s wintry provisions. Saving the water used to wash their humble abode, his mother made a rink out of the frozen water that had become ice.¹ An exceptional left winger in a decorated career that lasted 23 years, Johnny played more than 1500 games and scored over 550 goals. His accolades include a reserved place on the coveted Hockey Hall of Fame and being named as one of the 100 greatest players in history.²

Johnny is the exception.

Success in this sport is rare for people from working class backgrounds, and playing it requires a substantial investment of time and money. With access to facilities becoming increasingly difficult, it looks like hockey is becoming a venture for rich people.

Time is money

The first barrier for many trying their hand at ice hockey is the amount of time required to commit to the sport’s obligations. In an interview, Canadian student Katelyn Greer explains that the time commitment was the biggest challenge for her family when they supported her

¹ The life of John Bucyk covered in Our Leader, taken from *Young Ukraine*, 12/05/2010

² 100 Greatest NHL Players, taken from NHL, 01/01/2017

brother's hockey career. "A lot of time is put into it. There's hockey training camps, off ice training, on ice training. My parents were at hockey probably four nights a week".³ A quick online search finds that both Canadian and American youth hockey associations support what Greer is saying. Wellesley Youth Hockey Association in Massachusetts, USA, says "Practices, skills and scrimmages are between 1-3 times per week". The website has a note which says if people cannot keep up with the time commitments, they will not have much time on the ice.⁴ Less time on the ice means less chance of being scouted for higher leagues.

Some sports need a mixture of talent, passion, good luck and determination for success. The basketball player LeBron James was born to a 16-year-old single mother living in a deprived neighbourhood.⁵ The boxer Mike Tyson lost both his parents early in life. Yet, he managed to achieve a level of wealth most people can only dream of.⁶ In hockey, this is rare. Joshua Folkerson, a student at Western University in London, Canada, says, "Hockey has a prohibitive cost, especially at high levels. I played for about five years and my parents were hesitant about it just because of the cost...it's a sizeable commitment".⁷ Greer echoed Folkerson's sentiments, saying, "Parents pay entrance fees to the games. Plus all the gas used. Equipment is generally the first expense and you get into more costs when you join rep teams, as you pay association costs and then your away tournaments and additional trainers".

Looking at the numbers

An independent study found that Canadian families with a hockey-playing child between the ages of 3 and 17 have annual expenses of \$1,666 Canadian dollars.⁸ Many spend thousands more. Asking Greer about this, she says: "Getting hand me downs on equipment

³ Skype interview: Cardiff-Toronto, 06/11/2017

⁴ WHYA is a commitment, taken from WHYA, April 2008

⁵ Ryan Jones. 2003. *King James: Believe the Hype*. New York, St. Martin's Griffin.

⁶ Mike Tyson and Larry Sloman. 2013. *Undisputed Truth: My Autobiography*. Penguin Publishing Group

⁷ Skype interview: Cardiff-Toronto, 27/10/2017

⁸ Canadian Youth Sports Report, taken from Solutions Research Group Consultants Inc., 10/06/2014

makes things manageable. Playing house league is fairly cheap and almost everyone can afford to play". Her solutions have been partially implemented. Folkerson adds: "Canadian Tire's jumpstart program and second hand equipment stores help less affluent families". Since 2015, Bauer Hockey, a manufacturing company for sports equipment has made an annual donation of \$100,000 to Canadian Tire Jumpstart charities, which encourage youth involvement in physically stimulating activities.⁹ The Hyundai Hockey Helpers program promises \$1000 to families who cannot afford for their children to participate in the sport.¹⁰ Other schemes include the First Shift training program, which costs \$200 for membership.¹¹ This is cheaper than most other hockey programs. A study by an organisation called the Canadian scholarship trust plan, found that three out of five Canadian parents say they or someone they know has used retirement money or loaned funds to pay for their child's hockey career.¹² Folkerson says, "For kids to get into development leagues which feed into the NHL, parents will have to pay thousands per year, which can preclude any advancement in the sport". Jim Parcels and Ken Campbell co-authored the book *Selling The Dream* which is about the financial sacrifices parents make for the off chance that their child will achieve hockey fame. On October 27 last year, Teri Pecoskie wrote in *The Hamilton Spectator* that Campbell and Parcels find that playing ice hockey has become an exclusive club where only parents who can afford the financial burden are the members. The club's exclusivity increases with the level of competition. Statistically, Campbell says about 0.1% of the kids who play hockey will appear in just one game in the NHL.¹³ This is quite the gamble and the odds are not in the favour of the working class youth. On this matter, Greer says, "Basically as you move up in terms of rep, costs are significantly higher. At a certain point you're only hoping to be scouted. There has to be a trade off".

⁹ Canadian Tire Jumpstart Charities and Bauer Hockey donations, taken from *Canada News Wire*, 10/01/2015

¹⁰ Hyundai Hockey Helpers program, taken from Hyundai USA, 04/09/2012

¹¹ First Shift program encouraging children to get involved with hockey, taken from *The Star*, 03/11/2014

¹² Canadian Parents are willing to go into debt to put a child into hockey, taken from CST, 12/11/2013

¹³ Ken Campbell and Jim Parcels interview, taken from *The Hamilton Spectator*, 27/10/2016

The good old days

It hasn't always been this way. Was Johnny just lucky to be born in hockey's golden age? Carey Platt, Residence Clerk at Western University reminisces about the 1930s, a time he says hockey was a working class sport for rural communities. He says, "I grew up in the rural Ottawa valley... It was pond hockey so we would usually have to clear the ice ourselves. A few from my home town have made it to the NHL".¹⁴ Asking him whether his hometown is a wealthy one brings about his reflective answer: "It was a divided community. There was old money on one side of town, city owned housing on the other". Looking up Platt's hometown of Pembroke in eastern Canada, NHL records bring up the names of the retired players Randy Holt and Doug Keans.¹⁵

There are still people who think hockey is a sport for the working class. After all, another one of the greats, Gordie Howe, was the son of a labourer during the Great Depression. He was one of nine siblings, and he certainly was not born with a silver spoon in his mouth.¹⁶ Known as "Mr Hockey," Howe scored over 1000 goals in season and during playoffs. Michael Miner of the *Chicago Reader* wrote about playing hockey with classmates whose parents were refugees from the Second World War: "Their parents couldn't afford school shoes. But hockey was a cheap sport". Miner cites Brian Campbell and Ray Emery as players who came from ordinary communities.¹⁷ His case for hockey as a blue collar sport dwindles, because Emery was awarded a scholarship which undoubtedly helped him forge his NHL career.¹⁸

¹⁴ Telephone interview, Cardiff-London, Canada, 09/11/2017

¹⁵ NHL players from Pembroke, Ontario, taken from QuantHockey, 16/11/2017

¹⁶ Steve Dryden. 1998. *The Top 100 NHL Players of All Time*. Toronto: Transcontinental Sports Publishers.

¹⁷ Michael Miner. The case for hockey as a blue collar sport, taken from *Chicago Reader*, 01/07/2013

¹⁸ Andrew Duffy. 2008. A Fighter's Chance, taken from *Ottawa Citizen*, 20/01/2008

Accessing ice rinks, particularly for people from the countryside is virtually impossible without a vehicle. Cameron Lee, a retail assistant from Toronto says, “I think access to an ice rink is an issue. We take it for granted, but they’re not here there and everywhere.”¹⁹

Don’t hate the player

The cost of ice hockey is more than financial. A contact sport with a tendency to become violent, injuries spanning from minor scrapes to critical head trauma have been reported.²⁰

The popularity of ice hockey is unlikely to wane. Numeris, the Canadian audience measurement organisation, revealed that in 2017, the Canadian viewership numbers for the first round of NHL playoffs was 1.3 million.²¹ The question “Is it worth it?” must be asked when you think about the fact that no NHL player can earn a salary of more than \$15 million US dollars.²² Considering that parents could spend an unlimited amount of money on the slim chance that their offspring might strike it rich, it seems like a risky move. Despite this, progress is stagnant and major changes are unlikely to be seen in the near future. It might just be that people are happy to spend their hard-earned cash on “The Game of the Rich”.

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¹⁹ Telephone interview, Cardiff-Toronto, 06/11/2017

²⁰ Mayo clinic, Youth Ice hockey injuries, taken from *Pediatrics, Science Daily*, 03/06/2014

²¹ First round of NHL 2017 average viewership, taken from *Edmonton Journal*, 25/04/2017

²² NHL salary caps 2017-2018 season, taken from NHLPA, 18/06/2017

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