



TOP 30 NHL PROSPECTS

AUSTON MATTHEWS
ZURICH ZSC (SuA)

JESSE PULJUJARVI
KARPAT (FinE)

PATRIK LAINE
TAPPARA (FinE)

ALEXANDER NYLANDER
MISSISSAUGA (OHL)

MATTHEW TKACHUK
LONDON (OHL)

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BEATING

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BY MIKE TOTH

EVERYWHERE YOU TURN, THERE'S A DIFFERENT OPINION ON JUST HOW MUCH HOCKEY A YOUNG PLAYER SHOULD PLAY. HERE'S OUR CASE FOR THE WELL-ROUNDED MULTI-SPORT ATHLETE.

A FOOTBALL, A FEW BASEBALL GLOVES AND A PILE OF TENNIS BALLS.

Not the collection of sports paraphernalia you might expect at a typical minor hockey practice. But with a lengthy season that seems to get longer every year, a coach sometimes has to shake things up to prevent tired young players from suffering a case of "hockey burnout." With that in mind, I reached into my sporting bag of tricks for a recent late-season practice involving the 10-year-old Toronto Atom team I coach, and the kids had a ton of fun. A game of touch football on skates; tossing a bunch of high fly balls in the air as the lads channeled their inner Kevin Pillar, pulling off a bunch of diving catches just like the ace Blue Jays outfielder; and finishing up the workout with a raging round of shinny, using bouncy tennis balls in place of pucks.

Football? Baseball gloves? Tennis Balls?

Why not?

After all, "hockey burnout" is a definite danger and, instead of playing even more hockey during the summer, a lot of coaches believe that soccer balls, lacrosse sticks and tennis rackets should also be included in a young athlete's mix.

James Boyd is the Head Coach and General Manager of the Ontario Hockey League Mississauga Steelheads. Before that, Boyd was a fiery left-winger who played four OHL seasons, including the 1996 campaign that saw him rack up 22 goals for the Belleville Bulls. But hockey wasn't the only item on Boyd's athletic resume.

"The climate was a lot different back then," said Boyd. "Summer hockey was just getting started and I played a little bit. But for the most part, I played lacrosse during the summer and even in the winter, I spent some time skiing."

As the architect of a major junior program that boasts future NHLers such as Sean Day, Mike McLeod and Alexander Nylander, Boyd wouldn't be too thrilled to spot any of his young Steelheads roaring down an icy slope on a pair of skinny boards. However, he does believe that hockey players should get away from the game every now and then, especially during the summer months.

"I think players really benefit from taking a break. You definitely need to set aside some time for yourself to recharge mentally, even if it's just heading up to the cottage and sticking a fishing pole in the water."

Alexander Nylander, for instance, has more than hockey running through his blood. Yes, Nylander is expected to be selected in the first round of this summer's NHL draft and yes, his brother, William, is a hot shot prospect ▶

IT'S WELL KNOWN THROUGH RESEARCH THAT THERE ARE A NUMBER OF CONCERNS WHEN IT COMES TO EARLY SPECIALIZATION IN A SPECIFIC SPORT.

PAUL CARSON
VICE-PRESIDENT OF HOCKEY DEVELOPMENT FOR HOCKEY CANADA





“ALEX LOVES PLAYING TENNIS. IT’S KIND OF FUNNY LISTENING TO HIM TALK ABOUT PLAYING AGAINST HIS SISTER BECAUSE IT SOUNDS LIKE THE MATCHES CAN GET PRETTY COMPETITIVE.”

JAMES BOYD
HEAD COACH AND GENERAL MANAGER OF THE MISSISSAUGA STEELHEADS, OHL

◀ with the Toronto Maple Leafs, while his father, Michael, enjoyed a solid 15-year NHL career. But Alexander also has a teenage sister, Jacqueline, who’s a rising young tennis star and the Nylander family battles on the court are legendary.

“Alex loves playing tennis,” said Boyd. “It’s kind of funny listening to him talk about playing against his sister because it sounds like the matches can get pretty competitive.”

A hockey player never wants to lose their competitive edge by taking a summer holiday. But Boyd believes other sports can certainly pick up the slack.

“Playing sports such as lacrosse and soccer can help you see the ice a little differently. The greatest advantage of playing another sport is that you get a different perspective and it gives you a different skill set that you can bring to the ice. Guys who play baseball learn about taking a more patient approach. A hockey player who competes at a high level of soccer is almost guaranteed to be better with the puck in their feet and players with a lacrosse background do a better job of keeping their heads up on the ice because they have to be ready to accept passes at eye level in lacrosse.”

Paul Carson is even more adamant about the importance of hockey players taking part in a variety of sports. Carson is the Vice-President of Hockey Development for Hockey Canada and he says there can be some troubling consequences for athletes who live a “hockey only” lifestyle.

“It’s well known through research that there are a number of concerns

when it comes to early specialization in a specific sport,” explained Carson. “We know that there are over-use injuries. If you play only one particular sport, there’s a less developed overall base in the body which can lead to physical breakdowns as the athlete gets older. Mental burnout is also a big problem because it results in a young athlete getting tired of a sport, which leads to a decrease in sports participation because when they lose interest in the only activity they’ve been involved in, they may not have the ability or confidence to transfer into another sport.”

Despite the risks, however, some hockey parents are willing to push the envelope. A commonly expressed fear by many hockey moms and dads is that if their child doesn’t focus on hockey 12 months of the year, they might get left behind. Carson understands the sentiment but cautions parents to stay focused on the big picture.

“You’ve got to decide very early on in your child’s sports career, and I’m talking five, six and seven years of age, what your intended outcome is 10 to 15 years down the road. Participation in sports that leads to solid citizenship and success at school, those are the things that lead to the tremendous make-up of a youngster. If there’s an opportunity for a young athlete to be successful in a given sport, be it professionally or through a scholarship, that’s just a by-product of a great sports experience. If all we do is drive down main street for one single experience and one single outcome we really run the risk of compromising the development of that youngster’s whole person as they get older.”

Boyd, meanwhile, believes there’s an interesting new trend developing and he points to the growing American influence on the game of hockey.

“A lot of players such as (current NHLers) Beau Bennett and Jason Zucker (California natives) and (NHL draft prospect) Auston Matthews (Arizona) are coming from non-traditional hockey markets. A lot of times they’re playing other sports because hockey isn’t the big thing. So when you see these types of players emerge it tempers the perception of parents. A lot of them feel their kid is going to fall behind if they don’t play hockey 12 months a year. I don’t believe that’s the case and I think some of the hockey players coming out of markets such as Texas and Florida really show

the advantages of playing a number of different sports.”

Scott Luik grew up in the much more traditional hockey market of Whitby, Ontario and in 1990, he lived a real-life Canadian hockey dream. Luik was part of the Oshawa Generals’ dramatic double overtime victory over the Kitchener Rangers at the 1990 Memorial Cup; a championship squad that included a 16-year-old Eric Lindros. Luik joined the Generals at Christmas after spending the first part of the season playing U.S. college hockey and he says the mental and physical grind of the Gennies long playoff run was a real eye-opener.

“In the NCAA you were only playing about 25 games a year,” said Luik. “So jumping to the OHL and playing that much hockey was quite an adjustment. I recall my father coming into the dressing room after we won the Memorial Cup and taking a picture while we were all celebrating. When I looked at the photo, I was shocked at how skinny and lean I’d become after the playoff run and I remember how drained I was.”

These days, Luik is serving as a minor hockey coach in Toronto, guiding an East York Novice Select Bull Dogs team that includes his eight-year-old son, Cole.

Luik’s goal?

Making sure his son and his Bull Dogs buddies have the time of their lives and don’t get burned out by playing too much hockey.

“It’s a long season and these kids are so young. In hockey cities such as Toronto there’s a certain level of craziness when it comes to parents pushing their kids into spring and summer hockey. But I’m pretty firmly against the need to specialize when you’re so young. I don’t believe playing summer hockey is going to make a bit of difference by the time the kids get to be 14 or 15. That’s when the skill gap narrows and what’s going to take them to the next level is their passion for the game and their natural ability.”

Speaking of natural ability, Carson says that encouraging young hockey players to take up another sport can have a huge cross-benefit.

“For example, what sport is good for young, developing goaltenders? Well, you start thinking about baseball and not just baseball, but what specific positions would be best for a goalie. You want positions where you’re going to be handling the ball a lot, so you look at catcher, short-stop or first base. The ball never does the same thing twice and all of a sudden your glove hand and reaction time shows tremendous signs of improvement when you head back on the ice. If parents were really calculated about what’s good for their kids, they’d think through those kind of ideas.”

New ideas to keep the game of hockey fresh and fun for young players.

So don’t be afraid to toss a few footballs, baseball gloves and tennis balls out on the ice to spice up that late season practice.

And if the kids pick up some of that equipment during the summer too?

All the better to make hockey players much better athletes. **H**

DIFFERENT HOCKEY SORTS WHO PLAYED COMPLETELY DIFFERENT SPORTS

So you want to be an NHL hockey player?

Don’t be afraid to pick up a lacrosse stick, baseball bat or tennis racket.

That’s the message from a number of past and present NHL stars, many of whom developed their on-ice skills by strutting their stuff in a variety of other fun and games.

LACROSSE

John Tavares is the captain of the New York Islanders, the owner of one of the sweetest pair of hands in all of hockey. Tavares developed those talents by playing lacrosse in his youth, often crediting the sport for his ability to protect the puck and utilize the hand-eye coordination needed to finish second in the NHL scoring race last season, racking up 86 points in 82 games.

Meanwhile, the list of other NHL lacrosse grads includes some more impressive names. Toronto Maple Leafs president and Hockey Hall of Fame member Brendan Shanahan, former scrappy forward-turned fitness guru Gary Roberts and Tampa Bay Lightning scoring star Steven Stamkos—a trio of respected hockey men who also twirled lacrosse sticks in their youth.

BASEBALL

The guy who beat out John Tavares by a single point to win last year’s Art Ross trophy?

Say hello to Jamie Benn, the high-scoring captain of the Dallas Stars. Like Tavares, Benn was a two-sport athlete growing up; so successful at baseball, in fact, that in 2006 he was named the Most Valuable Player of his Victoria, B.C. baseball team that won the provincial championship.

Putting up points and pounding a baseball must have something in common, as NHL scoring legend Jarome Iginla, still sniping a pile of goals for the Colorado Avalanche, is also a baseball grad. Iginla was a talented pitcher before moving behind the plate, honing his skills so successfully that he became the starting catcher for the Canadian junior national team before deciding to chase pucks on a full-time basis.

And don’t forget about “Mr. Hockey” himself, Gordie Howe. In another life, Howe may have come to be known as “Mr. Baseball.” A pure natural athlete, the Detroit Red Wings hero often took batting practice with the Detroit Tigers, amazing his Major League counterparts by belting a truck load of baseballs over the Tiger Stadium fence.

TENNIS

It stands to reason that the “King of New York” would be a huge tennis fan.

The Big Apple, after all, is the annual home of The U.S. Open, one of the marquee events on the tennis calendar. Henrik Lundqvist (dubbed “The King”) is one of Gotham’s most popular athletes and hones his amazing netminding skills by striking fuzzy green balls over the tennis net. A huge tennis fan, Lundqvist is good buddies with the legendary “Bad Boy” of the sport, John McEnroe. Bad boys, it seems, have to stick together as famous NHL tough guy Tie Domi lists McEnroe as his all-time favourite athlete, with Domi getting the chance to line up beside Johnny Mac for a charity doubles match in Hamilton a few years ago.

Of course, there’s another tennis connection to hockey, as the lovely and (semi) talented Anna Kournikova once had well-documented romantic flings with Hockey Hall of Famers Sergei Fedorov and Pavel Bure. However, that’s a case of “Love, Set and Match” that goes down a completely different path.

