



FEEDER SYSTEM IN MASS CHAOS

Massachusetts is still a U.S. hockey hotbed, but the number of options for developing players is out of control **BY RYAN KENNEDY**

THERE'S A PHRASE THAT comes up a lot when discussing the grassroots hockey scene in Massachusetts these days: "watered down." Still a hub in America for grassroots participation, the state is going through a period where many believe kids are being pushed into playing too many games, while at the elite level a laundry list of league options is hurting the competition balance. "It's too watered down, there are too many fishbowls," said one NHL executive. "Minnesota has one fishbowl."

While hockey has expanded greatly in the U.S., a ton of talent still comes out of the Three M's: Massachusetts, Michigan and Minnesota. In Minnesota, high-school hockey is still a huge draw, with the state tournament featuring packed crowds at the Xcel Energy Center, home of the NHL's Wild. In Michigan, youth hockey programs such as Compuware, Little Caesar's and Honeybaked rule the roost.

But in Massachusetts, there is a scramble for talent between elite prep schools, the North American League and the United States Premier League.

The NAHL, which has teams from Alaska to Texas to Pennsylvania, moved into Massachusetts in 2016 with the Northeast Generals and will expand to Maine next season. The USPHL is also adding a team in Maine for 2019-20.

The USPHL has been around for several years under various names, counting NHL alumni such as Charlie Coyle and Chris Wagner of the Boston Bruins. In its current form, it features leagues for kids as young as eight, right up to junior – its new National Collegiate Development Conference being the highest level of competition. Some of the USPHL circuits feature teams as far south as Florida, but the NCDC is strictly a Northeast affair for now.

While NHL scouts keep an eye on the league, no player has

MASSACHUSETTS MISHMASH

The USPHL, whose last NHL draft pick was Marino in 2015, is one of several loops vying for young players.

been drafted out of the USPHL since Edmonton took blueliner John Marino of the South Shore Kings back in 2015.

Agent Matt Keator has been a Boston fixture for decades, first as an NHL scout and now as a player rep and a hockey dad. He'd love to see an emphasis on practice and development, rather than games. "They have to find a way to get away from it being all about tournaments and making money," Keator said. "It's an issue."

One NHL scout had a blunter assessment: "It's outrageous what they're charging kids these days," he said. "These guys should wear ski masks when they come into the rink."

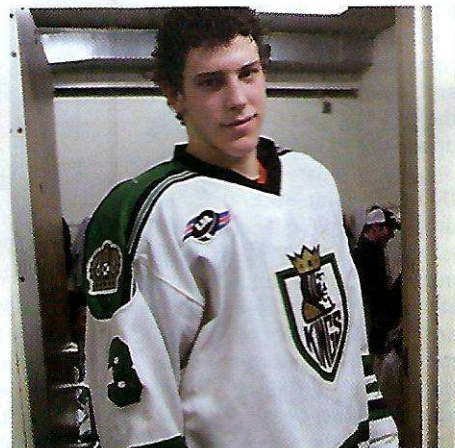
Many of those in Massachusetts, including NHL scouts and executives, see eight-year-old kids playing up to 90 games and skating 11 months a year. Parents don't want their child to fall behind the competition, and the result is a lot

of expensive tryouts and tournament fees. And the number of people trying to cash in on the state's passion is taking a toll. "It's a money-driven state now," said the NHL scout. "It's not like when I grew up. Now, a six-year-old shows up with a cheque for \$5,000 and all of a sudden he's an elite AAA player. You get teams with two good players and no one else touches the puck. Then the kid gets tired of being a cheerleader and loses interest in the sport."

And that watering-down of talent hurts the high-end kids, too, because they're not developing by playing soft competition. Numerous profession-

als interviewed for this piece would like to see a return to "town hockey," where kids actually played for their local teams, instead of chasing spots on elite squads in the Northeast. For the NHL scout, he'd like to see an elite league of six teams – but not until the kids are 12 or 13. Keator, the agent, floated a similar idea for an eight-team circuit.

Back in the day, Massachusetts was famous for developing players, from Jeremy Roenick and Tony Amonte at Thayer Academy to Keith Tkachuk at Malden. Those were prep schools, but before that you had public high-school success stories like Tom Barrasso and Bob Sweeney. The idea of a kid coming out of Acton-Boxborough High now is unthinkable; same with a city high school in Boston proper.



BACK WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

Coyle, a USPHL grad, returned to his Boston-area roots when he was traded to the Bruins in February.

The happy ending to this story would be for the Massachusetts scene to pull back from its current state of affairs, but those who know the area aren't optimistic – a lot of folks are making money and it's too tempting to keep the taps turned on. "Every other day a new league pops up," said the scout. "And everyone is a power-skating coach all of a sudden." **H**