

# Grassroots to Gold: Sweden uses innovative thinking to tackle development, challenges

By: Sunaya Sapurji 2017

Like many good ideas, Sweden's revamped development system was borne out of failure and chaos. At the start of the new millennium its program was lagging. Sure, they were still producing NHLers, overall, growth was stunted.

A proud hockey nation, the Swedish Ice Hockey Association decided they needed an overhaul. They tasked Tommy Boustedt with the job of turning the program around.

He had been coaching Frolunda when he got a call from the federation asking him to leave the bench behind and join them working on hockey development instead. Boustedt, who had been a successful coach in the then-Swedish Elite League, was in the prime of his career. He wasn't really interested.

The more he thought about it though, the more the idea appealed to him. Instead of helping players on one team reach their potential, he could help players in an entire country. He joined the Swedish Ice Hockey Association in 2002 as their director of youth development.

The first thing he did was assemble everyone involved with Swedish hockey for a deep analysis session to figure out what was failing in the system. Long story short: It was a complete mess.

**"The problems were at many levels," said Boustedt. "The recruitment wasn't good enough. We weren't retaining enough players to create good programs. We had a lack of development programs for players. Our coaching education wasn't good enough and that's because we weren't producing enough good education materials. The player development program wasn't even in print so it was different in different areas of Sweden — everyone was running their own program."**

The proof came the following year at the 2003 world junior championships in Halifax. The Swedes went 1-4 in the round robin and were forced to play in the relegation round. They finished eighth and survived, but the result was an embarrassing wake-up call heard across the country.

"Everyone saw the problems," said Boustedt, who now serves as the general secretary of the Swedish Ice Hockey Association. "We always had the knowledge about what was important if you wanted to develop players but we didn't co-operate in Swedish hockey. The big difference from 15 years ago is that we started to co-operate. ***We are a small country worldwide so to be successful and have a little chance to compete with the big countries ... we need to be more efficient because we don't have the***



but



***(enrollment) numbers like the big countries. The best way to be efficient is to work together.***

Expecting resistance or egos to get in the way, Boustedt said he was surprised at how easily everyone came on board to deal with the issues. The fact that he had already built connections thanks to his work as an analyst on Swedish TV along with his 20-year career as a coach only helped matters.

“I think that’s why they asked me to do this because I knew everyone in hockey in Sweden,” said Boustedt. “When you have a big network it’s much easier to sell ideas. The big thing was getting everyone together — we had about 150 people in this big project to develop Swedish hockey — so everyone who had something to say about hockey was in it. If you’re in it from the start and you feel like you’re making a difference to the outcome then you won’t work against it when it becomes reality.

“That was the trick to do it.”

The trick turned into a full-blown magic act. They put everyone on the same page, using their resources to invest in hiring and educating coaches who in turn were able to better instruct their players. They took ideas from other countries, honed them and then incorporated them with their own into their development system. They put their new curriculum writing — breaking it down by age — with focus on on-ice, off-ice and mental training.

Sweden, for its 64,000 registered players and 9.8 million population, has since been punching above its weight. Ten per cent of the [active players in the NHL](#) are Swedes. At last year’s NHL draft 27 Swedes were taken, a far cry from the 15 taken a decade before.

At the world juniors, they’ve medaled in six of the last 10 years, including winning gold in 2012. Amazingly, Sweden has not lost a game in the round-robin portion of the tournament since Dec. 31, 2006.

“There were a lot of people who pushed and helped with youth and junior development,” said Boustedt. “That’s not a problem in Sweden to get people together and today I think everyone is thinking the same way. We have other challenges in Swedish hockey but not in development.”

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As a child growing up in Kristianstad, Maple Leafs first-round pick Timothy Liljegren remembers just how bad his club team was — in fact, he believes playing for bad team helped him as a defenceman. He surmises from about ages four to 15, he was on the end of many losing games.

“When you’re a little kid you still want to compete,” said the 18-year-old. “I played on a pretty bad team when I was growing up. We lost *a lot*, but that really made me want to win more.”

***Now, for kids under-13 in Sweden, there are no standings. Scores are kept during the games, but at the end of it there’s no written record of wins or losses — it’s immaterial. There are no individual stats kept for the regular season or for tournaments at the U13 level. They play games, but there are no tryouts and no real “leagues” as such for those ages. The focus is more on skill development and less on wins and losses. The rule, implemented last year, to stop stats and standings for younger age groups has been very controversial.***

“It’s been a tough discussion back home,” said Toronto defenceman Calle Rosen of the change. “The kids are keeping track of their records themselves so why not just have a normal standing? Let them compete. But I guess it depends how young you are. The coaches I had during my time when I was a junior and when I was younger, they always let every guy play and I think that’s what made hockey so fun, too. That was a big part.”

***For the Swedish Ice Hockey Federation, the goal now is to not only bring new people to the game, but to retain the players they do have — for life. And that means doing things a little differently.***

“Children should be children, not young adults,” said Anders Larsson, the president of the Swedish federation in an interview with daily newspaper [Dagens Nyheter](#), when the new rules were introduced in 2016.

The numbers for Sweden’s “Tre Kronor Hockey School” which is the national program geared toward kids are continuing to grow. Their [numbers from 2016](#) show that there were 34,500 children between ages five and 10 registered in the program — an increase of 2,500 from the previous year.



***“Hockey used to be like a pyramid, you’d have many players in the beginning, but in the end you’d parse it down to a few at the top,” said Boustedt. “We’ve tried to go from this pyramid to more like a rectangle, so the kids who start playing at seven, we want them to be enrolled in hockey for a lifetime not only for 15 years or something.***

***“In our system it’s not even one per cent that become elite players — it’s a very small amount. So, our activities aren’t only for the ones that make it an elite career, it’s mostly for the others — the other 99 per cent.”***

That means coming up with low-cost ideas to keep the game affordable and putting extra resources into education, particularly helping to educate parents about hockey. They’ve started programs specifically to help parents navigate the minor hockey minefield.

“When the kids are practicing you can have the parents in the cafeteria and you can have a workshop with things like this once a week,” said Boustedt. “The parents are there anyways so give them a hot dog and a cup of coffee and then you have a person come in and talk, following the federation program, so they can have a discussion.”

And since Sweden is relatively small, geographically, it’s much easier to have coaches and instructors visiting clubs. In fact, Sweden, [like their Finnish neighbors](#), have federation appointed instructors in different regions going out to clubs instead of the other way around.

***“Education is the key to solving so many of our problems,” said Boustedt.***

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Andreas Johnsson spent a week going back and forth trying to figure out his future. The big decision was whether to leave Sweden after two years in the SHL playing for Frolunda, his hometown team, or to head to North America to join the Toronto Marlies in the American Hockey League.

“I knew that if I played well, I would get a good role back home and I was still playing with pros — older guys — and it’s a hard league,” said Johnsson. “If I came over (to North America) I wouldn’t know what to expect. So, in my case I felt like I needed another year to develop on the ice and off the ice, too. I felt like that would be easier for me to do back home — you’re secure, you have your family, your home. I had already played on the same team for two years so I felt I needed one more year. With other guys maybe they feel mature and they feel ready to leave everything.”



“I really had to think about it.”

Leaving home is a hard decision to make and the Swedish Ice Hockey Association is trying to make it even harder. The Swedes have always taken a protectionist approach with their young players.

“We have too many players in North America, but at the same time it’s good because we know we’re doing good stuff with our youth and junior development,” said Boustedt.

In the past, they’ve done battle with the Canadian Hockey League to try and keep their young stars at home. Now they’ve turned their sights on the American Hockey League.

Like everyone else in Europe, Sweden uses the club model where players can join a team as a kid and then spend the next 10 or so years moving all the way up through that club’s system. The problem of players leaving Swedish clubs early is twofold: Firstly, if a player leaves for a league like the CHL and is subsequently drafted by an NHL team, the CHL club gets the NHL development fee for the player. The Swedish club, despite their investment, gets nothing.

And those clubs are essentially run as not-for-profits because team “owners” are its members.

***“In North America people own teams and they have an interest in making money in the end,” said Boustedt. “In Sweden no clubs or the federation are making any money because it’s against our rules if you run a club. If you invest in a club in Sweden — you can buy shares, but they’re maximized to 49 per cent — the other 51 per cent must be owned by the members. So, at the end of year, you don’t need to make a profit; you shouldn’t make a profit. The money goes back into the development and programs for the club.***

***“That’s the big reason we are more into our development system than you are in North America.”***

Secondly, the end goal of many of these clubs is to develop players for their own teams in either the Allsvenskan (Division I) or SHL (top pro league). Players leaving early hinders clubs from benefiting from their own development system.

“It’s like if the Maple Leafs have a hockey school for kids and then an under-8 team, an under-9 team all the way up,” explains Boustedt. “If the Maple Leafs pay for all of this and then when the players are ready to play for the Toronto Maple Leafs at the ACC, well no, they leave to play in the U.S. for the New York Rangers instead — why should the Maple Leafs pay for all this? That’s the problem for our clubs today and also for our federation because many of the players leave too early.”

According to the Swedish Ice Hockey Association’s [annual report for 2016](#), Sweden received the equivalent of roughly \$8 million (Cdn.) in transfer payments from the NHL. Boustedt and other federation members met with NHL general managers last March in Boca Raton, Fla., to discuss the issue of players leaving early. He said the meeting was productive and that many NHL general managers understood their problem. At the end of the day, though, the NHL is still a business.

“Many NHL clubs need young players for their American Hockey League affiliate teams and some clubs think they develop better in North America than in our Swedish league and on our men’s national team,” said Boustedt. “The problem for us is we need to have money put in for all this development for those clubs and the federation and then we have to be able to use the players in Swedish hockey.”

At present, the NHL has an agreement with the Swedish federation to keep more of their players at home. The agreement only allows for first-round draft picks to go to the AHL if drafted from Swedish teams (Europeans drafted from CHL clubs are bound by the CHL-NHL agreement). So a second-round pick from a Swedish team would have to continue playing in the SHL until they played more than 260 SHL games — or more likely — renegotiated their contract in order to leave.

And, for the most part, staying home doesn’t seem to be a problem.



Rosen believes staying in Sweden helped him become a better player.

“For me, it was the best thing,” said Rosen. “I stayed in Sweden until I was 23. I played junior and then I played two years in (Allsvenskan) just to get my ice time and I was playing with men. Playing in a men’s league it’s so much different from junior hockey, so in that way, it was really good for me because I had two years in (Allsvenskan) and two years in (the SHL). After that, that’s when I felt, ‘OK now it’s time to move over here.’”

“But you take a guy like Liljegren who is so mature, he can play already here now and that’s great for him. I think all depends on where you come from and which club, you’re on back home in Sweden and just what type of guy you are.”

***Sweden’s development program is strong enough that players are in the position to choose. In fact, Sweden has become [a destination for players from smaller countries to land in order to develop further at the junior or pro level.](#)*** Even Liljegren appreciates how playing in Sweden prepared him for his first year of pro at 18.

“I think Sweden has great leagues — both the Allsvenskan and the SHL — the Allsvenskan is pretty much like the AHL as a development league so I think it’s good for young players to take

that next step. That was what I did last year (moving to Allsvenskan). Hockey in Sweden is growing and it's a good place to be."

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In 2015, the Swedish Ice Hockey Association commissioned a report called "Hockey 2025" with the goal of trying to look at ways to bring new people to the game.

The influx of immigrants — particularly refugees — has made it critical for the country to expand the game beyond the generational Swede. It has one of the highest rates of immigration in Europe taking in 163,000 immigrants in 2016, according to [Statistics Sweden](#).

Hockey in Sweden has also predominantly been a sport for the white male demographic, so the report looked at ways to expand their typical enrollment base.

"Hockey 2025 was aimed at getting more people from other cultures and women into hockey," said Boustedt. "We've tried to create new programs directing people coming to Sweden — refugees for instance from Syria — and tried to present hockey to them and invite them to try out hockey."

***They've started programs catered to both groups. In order to get kids involved, the Swedish federation sent out personalized letters to parents with children between the ages of six and eight living near a hockey club or an arena.*** The invites were designed to look like Mats Sundin's No. 13 Tre Kronor jersey — but instead of his name on the back, it was replaced with the name of the child. The text was translated into six different languages. According to Boustedt, some 300,000 invitations to try hockey were sent out last year to parents.

One of the teams that has found success in bringing more women and immigrants to the game has been Gothenburg HC. The team started a program designed specifically for girls in the Gothenburg suburb of Angered — which has a high immigrant population.

Jan Mellgren, who is the sports chief at Gothenburg HC, said more needs to be done financially if Sweden wants to grow the game particularly with people new to Sweden without the means to pay for hockey.

"The (Swedish) association is helping us with letters to mail to children in Angered," said Mellgren. "They're helping us with jerseys and some (education materials), but I think in this type of area they need to do more. They need to do more for women's hockey, too."



"Women's hockey is a big focus, but the culture of hockey clubs is the male norm and it's difficult to break through that wall of the male norms. All the systems are prepared and built to educate male hockey players for the NHL and national teams and so on. ... At the club level I don't think they are so happy about this focus on women's hockey because it takes away ice time. We need more arenas in Sweden."

And the arena issue is a complex one in Sweden. At present, there are 356 indoor rinks and 136 outdoor ones. Based on their growing numbers, their ice is being maxed out.

“Our rinks are full,” said Boustedt. “Our biggest challenge today is to have more hockey rinks and in Sweden almost every rink is owned by the community and paid for by tax money. And if all these new people are coming you need more schools, you need more daycare centers, hospitals and all these things which also use tax money.

“Me as a hockey person, I see that hospitals and schools and daycare centers are more important than to build hockey rinks. And that’s the biggest challenge today. If we don’t get more rinks we can’t grow anymore. It’s hard to create a good setup because you need lots of ice time if you want to become a good player. If there are too many boys and girls it’s impossible to have enough ice time.”

It’s not just hockey that has this problem, but other sports as well. The problem for hockey, however, is a chicken-egg scenario — politicians don’t want to fund arenas to serve a niche demographic, but at the same time it’s hard to introduce new immigrants and women to hockey if you don’t have the ice time.

“If we’re only good at developing elite players (politicians) aren’t interested,” said Boustedt. “Swedish politicians are interested in health care matters and improving quality of life (through sports).”

So, it’s become a tough balancing act for the federation to manage.

“We are experts at the elite level but it’s tough at the other end to get new people into hockey and to retain them.”

But considering where Sweden has come since the early 2000s with their hockey program, it’s only a matter of time before they figure it out. Boustedt is already working on it: “We have to think new.”