

**“Cross-Border” Shopping!: Understanding the Resources and Strategies used for Recruiting Canadian Hockey Players by NCAA Division I Universities and Colleges**

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**Organizational theory/culture**

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At a very young level (15-18 years old), the recruitment of youth hockey players occurs both in Canada and the United States. While much smaller when compared to the population of the United States, Canada is considered to be a hockey nation (Gruneau, & Whitson, 1993), as Canada’s hockey development system produces an overabundance of elite hockey players. As a result, actors such as the Canadian Hockey League (CHL) franchises and National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) Division I universities and colleges (also identified as NCAA institution) compete for youth Canada elite level hockey players. The complexity of the recruitment practices increases when actors cross national borders to recruit and compete for the services of the most talented players from a particular country. As Naylor (2002) explained, “The CHL and the NCAA have become stiff rivals when it comes to battling for the best players in Canada...” (p.51). Thus, we were interested in understanding the resources and strategies of NCAA Division I universities and colleges use to recruit Canadian male elite level hockey players, which Canadian players comprise approximately one third of the players in the NCAA in 2011 (Matheson, 2011). Of particular importance for us, was to examine the resources and strategies coaches from NCAA institutions use to convince Canadian elite hockey players to give up playing in the CHL as a 16 year old and to participate for an NCAA institution at 18 years old.

Hockey is one of the few elite competitive sports in North American where the recruitment of talented youth hockey players is regulated by different governing bodies. For Canadian born players, governing hockey bodies enforce residency regulations; for example, CHL franchises (the CHL governs hockey for players that have been drafted into this league and are between 16-21 years old), are only able to recruit players within specific geographical areas (e.g., players in western provinces can only be recruited by franchises from the Western Hockey League [member league of the CHL]). Canadian players also experience regulations by the NCAA (the NCAA is an amateur league for players generally between the ages of 18-22) as they have regulations regarding a player’s recruitment and eligibility. Holman (2007), who examined Canadian player migration to NCAA institutions between 1947 and 1980, indicated that, “as of August 1971, any student who had played in Canada’s top junior leagues [i.e., CHL] would be considered a professional, because it was common practice for Major Junior A teams to pay their players signing bonuses and weekly stipends beyond regular expenses. This legislation was designed to preserve the NCAA’s strictly amateur code, but it also had the intended effect of limiting another category of potential (and highly talented) Canadian recruits” (p.463).

Due to these regulations, NCAA Division I coaches “are often hamstrung by NCAA rules aimed primarily at basketball and football” (Kennedy, May 16, 2011, p.12). Furthermore youth players and parents attempt to navigate through the Canadian and American hockey system in an effort to choose a CHL franchise or NCAA institution that will provide the players with the greatest opportunity to compete in the National Hockey League (NHL). This research builds on Holman (2007), by exploring the current resources and strategies used by NCAA Division I institutions, as a means of understanding the use “cross-border” shopping to recruit the most talented Canadian hockey players in light of the recruitment regulations imposed by the NCAA since the early 1970’s.

There is a rich literature examining the competition for Canadian elite youth hockey players (Curtis & Birch, 1987; Maguire, 1996; Holman, 2007; Elliot & Maguire, 2008). Our study, while contributing to this stream of research, uses Resource Based View (RBV) of the firm (Barney, 1991) to analyze our research question on recruitment. The central premise of RBV is that an organization can gain a competitive advantage within an environment through the acquisition and use of key resources (Taylor, Doherty, & MacGrew, 2008). Hence, these key resources are used in the recruitment of Canadian hockey players and enable NCAA institutions to remain competitive with CHL. Our study also makes a contribution to the recruitment literature, by using our RBV to understand our findings. Rynes (1991) suggested that recruitment researchers have primarily concentrated on recruitment sources (e.g., Rynes & Barber,

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1990), recruiters (e.g., Alderfer & McCord, 1970; Thomas & Wise, 1999), and realistic job previews (e.g., Breugh & Billings, 1988). However, few studies in the field of sport management and management have made the connection between resources and strategies and competitive advantage in a sport where “cross-border” shopping exists.

This study employs a case study methodology approach (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003), to gain the firsthand knowledge of individuals experienced through real-life events (Yin, 2003). Semi-structured phone interviews were conducted with 10 coaches from NCAA institutions (there is 59 member colleges and universities of NCAA Division I hockey) through a random sample recruitment technique. Secondary data sources (i.e., websites, and documents) were also collected to augment the interview data. The data analysis process consisted of five stages, based on the work of Miles and Huberman (1994) and discussed in Edwards and Skinner (2009). Interviews were transcribed; themes were identified and coded drawn from the RBV literature: value, scarceness, inimitable, and substitutability of the resources (Barney, 1991; Mauws, Mason, & Foster, 2003).

Based on a preliminary analysis, it was no surprise that NCAA Division I colleges and universities coaches focused on creating a strong program that involves player development through practice ice time and off-ice training skills, while having an academic focus (value). The challenge that coaches faced with was getting the information about their program to the Canadian players) in a way that does not violate the NCAA regulations on recruitment. NCAA coaches acknowledged that recruitment was about “catching that late bloomer”, who the CHL franchises have missed. Some of the information dissemination strategies discussed were focused on networking at show case tournaments, personal contacts, or working with specific leagues throughout Canada that have a focus on developing players to play NCAA Division I hockey (e.g., Alberta Junior Hockey League). The success or lack of success on the recruitment of Canadian players was found to be dependent upon the resources allotted to the hockey program and the reputation of the program (inimitable). This reputation in a lot of cases was contingent upon the institution’s (i.e., coaches) ability to produce NHL players. Coaches suggested that there was an increase likelihood that Canadian players are going to or would consider the NCAA Division I hockey as more of a viable option as opposed to remaining in Canada because of an NCAA institutions reputation for being a potential “stepping stone” into the NHL (scarcity and substitutability). This research is important for the field of sport management in understanding the complexity of a sport system, such as the North American hockey system, and the resource allocation used for the recruitment of athletes when “cross-border” shopping exists.