“A Fork in the Road”: Decisional Factors Leading Elite Ice Hockey Players to Choose an NCAA Career

Rachel Madsen, Niagara University
Jimmy Smith, Niagara University
Michael Gentile, Niagara University
Alexis Wayne, Bowling Green State University

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Elite youth and junior ice hockey players in the US have several routes to choose from when considering how to further their hockey career with the long term goal of playing professionally (Edwards, 2012). Traditionally, the most common route to a professional career had been through the Canadian Hockey League (CHL), but over the past 10 years the number of professional hockey players coming from the NCAA ranks has been rising (Hockey Canada, 2011; Peters, 2013). This study aims to learn more about the factors that elite players consider when making the decision to play NCAA hockey.

Hockey players are developed differently than most other US athletes in that the high school team is typically not the best route to an elite playing career. In the US and Canada there exist junior hockey programs (US Junior Hockey and CHL, respectively) for players ages 16-20 that are privately run and often involve the athlete living away from home (Edwards, 2012). While both leagues pay the players’ living expenses, the CHL also provides players with a small stipend, making it a professional league (Edwards, 2012; Suppa, 2011). Many players continue to play in one of the junior systems until they are either drafted by a professional team or they reach age 20. In the past, the CHL was the primary route for Canadian players and the US junior system was the primary route for US players. However, more US players are now playing in the CHL, with the number doubling in the last six years to reach 131 (Podnieks, 2011).

If junior hockey players reach age 20 and have not been drafted to a professional team, those players in the US Junior system are able to pursue a NCAA hockey career where they would have additional chances to be drafted by a professional team (NCAA.org). However, those players in the CHL are not able to pursue an NCAA career because CHL teams are deemed professional by the NCAA and therefore those players lose their amateur status (Edwards, 2012; Podnieks, 2011; NCAA.org). Former CHL players who are not drafted to professional teams are able to pursue hockey within the Canadian intercollegiate athletic system through Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS). The CHL may provide scholarships at such universities for their former players (Edwards, 2012; Suppa, 2011) although there are various circumstances that can make a CHL player ineligible for this education benefit (Chard, 2013; Hall, Slack, Smith, & Whitson, 1991; Suppa, 2011). In addition, the CIS does not hold the same prestige as NCAA Division I hockey among US universities (Chard, 2013). The CHL does seem to possess an advantage in that 70% of NHL players come from the CHL (Chard, 2013; Ontario Hockey League, 2010).

Even though more NHL players come through the CHL, the number of players deciding to play in the NCAA rather than CHL has steadily increased over the years (Peters, 2013). In 2002, only 21% of NHL players (211) had come through the NCAA ranks. Currently, 30% of NHL players (271) participated in collegiate hockey (College Hockey, Inc; Peters, 2013). Among these 271 players, a large portion of them have spent a considerable time in college, with 74% or 200 spending at least 3 years in college (College Hockey, Inc). An additional change that has occurred involves more of the NHL’s impact players (leading scorers) coming from college hockey (Nestor, 2013; Peters, 2013). It is clear that a change is occurring in the route that young, elite ice hockey players determine to be the best preparation for their future. What is not known are the factors these players consider in deciding to pursue a CHL or an NCAA career.

This exploratory study will utilize social constructionism which posits that individuals construct their own realities and perceptions so that two people in the same situation might have vastly different perceptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002). Given these differences in perspective, there can be no truth regarding any situation that can be constructed. Because these experiences are open to interpretation by various participants, at times the dominant
perspective may represent the interests and perspectives of those who exercise the most power in a particular culture (Patton, 2002). Therefore, during data analysis researchers will be cognizant of varying explanations for similar choices made by participants as well as any cultural influences that may have impacted the decision making process.

In-depth, in-person, individual interviews with 30 freshmen and sophomore Division I hockey players from 3 different universities in the northeast and mid-west US will be conducted. Participants will be asked questions regarding their choices to play in the US junior hockey system and to pursue an NCAA hockey career rather than playing in the CHL. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed verbatim and thematic network analysis will then be conducted in order to organize the data into initial codes, basic themes, organizing themes, and global themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

The data will be considered within the rational decision making model. Rational decisions are ones that advance the welfare of the decision maker logically, based on the information the decision maker knows at the time (Brown, 2005). Rational decision making further posits that the decision maker will make choices that maximize benefits to themselves and attempt to minimize any cost. It is also acknowledged that decision makers are often influenced by the framing of the options available and thus decisions are not always as rational as they believe (DeMartino, Kumaran, Seymour, & Dolan, 2006). In analyzing the data, a priori themes from rational decision making theory will be identified. Researchers will also be aware of emergent themes as the topic of study has not been greatly explored by past researchers.

Even though few researchers have explored this topic in the past, anecdotal evidence tells us that perhaps the reason hockey players are increasingly choosing to play in college is because they are convinced it is the best of both worlds. They still have a chance of being drafted to the professional ranks and if not they often have an athletic scholarship and a high chance of completing their degree (Gruene & Whitson, 1993); Division I hockey players graduate at an average rate of 85% (Hosick, 2013; Nestor, 2013).

As previous researchers have pointed out, there is a lack of scholarly research in hockey and in particular there is a lack of perspective from those who live and experience the game (Stevens & Holman, 2013), which makes this a timely research project. Further, the development system in ice hockey is quite different from many other mainstream sports in the US. The results of this study can form the framework for additional research into the differences between hockey and other NCAA sports and the results of such differences. From a practical standpoint, awareness of elite hockey players’ decision making processes can allow coaches to develop recruiting strategies to address factors that players deem important. Going forward, this knowledge could also inform potential NCAA rule changes as they relate to amateurism and eligibility for hockey players. Finally, research in this area can provide the impetus to consider the potential implementation of a junior system for other NCAA sports as a potential solution to the struggles of the current model.