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Preparing for the day when the game spits you out

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Jocks and a school room: At one time they went together like a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. Together, like Don Cherry and a black suit.

Just didn't happen.

Today the lines of those parallel universes have blurred.

In U.S. colleges there are all-America Academic teams and the winners don't even have to apologize for reading something that comes only in hardcover.

There now are athletes who are both buffed and know that physics is not something that you get by spending time in the weight room. Stick a calculator and pocket protector in Wayne Gretzky's shirt and the greatest hockey play-maker in history had a body type that could've qualified for Geek Status -- Honourary Division.

Elite athletes are no longer strangers to the classroom. But the biggest thing missing from many of their games isn't speed, agility, strength or endurance. It's formal education. Still.

"We all should dream big, but we should know the statistics ... for every Stamkos or Tavares there are a hundred Joe Smiths who don't make even the AHL," says E.J. McGuire, director of Central Scouting for the National Hockey League. "I know I sound like Uncle George and the kids will roll their eyes but keep your options open."

For too many athletes, sports and school become an either/or issue. "One guy made me laugh when he told me he knew he was in trouble when he put his penalty minutes, goals and assists on a resume. The price many guys pay is that they're left with a limited skill set," says Duncan Fletcher, director of the Professional Athletes Training Program at Quinnipiac University, in Connecticut. "They decide at a young age to commit to being an elite athlete. They don't have time to establish a safety net ... an education." Those plans don't always work out as envisioned.

McGuire attended more than 200 games of NHL-draft eligible players last year but says that even for the experts, predicting players' futures is a crapshoot. "Look at this year; one kid really coming on is (Wojtek) Wolski, who played junior in Brampton.

'STRUGGLED'

He's dominant some games with Colorado. Compare that to Robbie Schremp (an Oilers' first-round pick), who I and a lot of people thought was a 'can't miss.' While he's not out of the picture he's struggled to be an American Hockey Leaguer," McGuire said. "You don't know how your OWN kids are going to turn out at 17 or 18 -- and we're trying to do it as scouts. There's a lot that can happen. It just shows how hard it is, even for very good players, to make it in pro sports."

BOOM AND BUST

EXHIBIT A

Alex Daigle. Poster boy for unfulfilled expectations. "The perfect choice for the expansion Senators: Photogenic, bilingual, and a marketing dream -- until he got on the ice," McGuire said.

"NHLers exploited his junior skating speed. He'd never learned to battle for the puck," McGuire said. "He was being praised as the next Lafleur. He liked the life of an NHL player off the ice, the attention ... but he found the NHL a lot tougher than the Quebec league. He thought stardom would follow him."

And, if it doesn't work out, what then?

Brandon Convery was going to be an NHL star when he was 15. No dummy, he actually completed high school before a lot of his non-hockey friends and was offered several U.S. scholarships. Instead, he left home for the Sudbury Wolves. "Coaches didn't stress education at all.

It never was mentioned to me," Converys said. "I had one goal and that was to play in the NHL, be a first-round pick."

Chalkboards were for X's and O's. "Players get used to the hockey routine and most don't make the effort to improve (their education)."

It's not just hockey's dilemma. According to the NCAA, only 6% of Division I basketball players who enrolled from 1997 to 2000 graduated. The graduation rate for NCAA Division I baseball players is 45%.

In football it depends whose calculator is used; the government stats say the NCAA has a 56% graduation rate while the NCAA claims 67%.

"The one thing I always say is make sure you have an identity outside of sport," says Bob LaMonte, a sports agent and university lecturer. "You have to understand that you are not identified by the sport that you play. You are identified by who you are

as a person.

"Having no identity outside of sport is one of the great tragedies that befalls a professional athlete because you have no worth as a person. You're a right-hand pitcher, you're a linebacker, you're a power forward. That's your identity. They're an object of what they do -- power hitter, good arm.

And that's pretty shallow."

BOOM AND BUST

EXHIBIT B

The hardest lessons for many youngsters aren't learned on the ice.

McGuire notes Blackhawks sophomore Patrick Kane was dropped off at Pat Verbeek's house as a major bantam and he's calling his mom in the car as they're driving back to Buffalo. "He's crying saying I miss home already.

It has been three hours. His story had a wonderful ending but how many others are out there?"

Two years ago the Sabres picked T.J. Brennan, of Willingboro, N.J. He went to St. John's to play junior. "His parents didn't even know where Newfoundland was," McGuire said. "It happens every year and these kids have to learn to deal with it. So if they do hit a home run and get a million dollars, don't begrudge them of it."

The program Fletcher directs at Quinnipiac has aided more than 300 former NHL players the past six years. "Not everybody is walking out of the game with a \$10-\$15 million nest egg," he said. "Even those that make the NHL only play on average 390 games. A lot of guys have to reposition themselves. We try to bridge the gap."

Gaps like the one Convery would face. His dream came true when he was selected, by Toronto, in 1992. Stardom did not follow. A dozen seasons later, after just 72 NHL games and nine NHL goals, he retired to an uncertain future.

"I miss playing. It has been tough, retiring at age 29 when I thought I would play until 38," Convery said. "But I always had a feeling I had more to offer and hated being controlled by the insecure world of hockey ... I knew I had to acquire new skills."

He found them at Quinnipiac, in the program supported by the NHL alumni, players' association and the NHL. Sometimes, says Fletcher, players come looking for help not because they need a job. Sometimes it is about learning to get a life. "They come and say: 'I've got to find something to do, I've got to find a purpose', " Fletcher said. "Otherwise they get: 'Well, dad used to play hockey but now he sits on the couch.'"

The Canadian Hockey League has improved its emphasis on education. Teams employ educational consultants and 95% of players attend school. Almost 200 former OHL players now are in university on OHL funded scholarships. "The CHL has

come country miles from the old days when NCAA recruiters would tell people: 'Do you want your kid playing pool all day and drinking beer on the bus all the way home.' That doesn't happen," McGuire said.

But there are challenges in major junior for players who want to be students. "It's tough. Often coaches, who are paid to win, don't pay the same kind of attention to academics as at say U.S. prep schools."

Which program is better? It depends on the student-athlete.

Parents, says McGuire need to do their homework. "What's good for one kid isn't even on the radar for another kid."

Louis Leblanc, from Quebec, could've played major junior hockey in Canada but went to the USHL instead, maintaining his U.S. college eligibility. He is projected as a first-round NHL draft pick by NHL Central Scouting this spring. But, he's already committed to Harvard. "I know some NHL people scoff at that and say: 'What does he want to be -- a student or a hockey player!' But the response to that is 'Both!' Teddy Donato is the coach there. Don't you think he's going to get good coaching at Harvard. Maybe it's not right for everyone," says McGuire, "But Joe Juneau went to Rensselaer Poly and emerged with an aeronautical engineering degree. And, the point is, Joey went on to have a pretty good NHL career."

BOOM AND BUST

EXHIBIT C

Today, Marc Savard is making \$5 million US a year but McGuire remembers a different player when he was coaching in Hartford. "I chuckle when he says: "We need to work together, blah blah ... I remember when he was the ultimate wild horse ... he cheated on the offensive side. I'm saying 'Savvy, you've got to cover the defensive zone first. Let's just say guys who had to work harder for their points might've been resentful of his talent. The only reason he wanted to get onto the ice in

Hartford to kill penalties was so he could try to score shorthanded.

"Today, he's smart. He's become a complete player."

At least hockey players now have options not in evidence a generation ago.

Mention Paul Harrison and most Leafs fans will not be flooded with golden memories -- one more indication of the illusion of fame. "I'm the answer to a trivia question," says Harrison from his home in South Porcupine, Ont, "I'm the last Leafs goalie to face the Canadiens in the playoffs."

Harrison would play parts of three seasons with the Leafs in a career that took him to Buffalo, Minnesota, Pittsburgh, Providence, Dallas and lastly, to Rochester under first-year coach Mike Keenan.

"I couldn't get out of hockey quick enough after playing for Mike (1982-83).

He was really hard on goalies. Phil Myre and I were the main guys, then a hot-shot kid named Jacques Cloutier took over ... he was fabulous."

And Harrison was out of work. He was 28. A wife. Two kids. "There wasn't a lot of transitional help. Once you're out of the loop, you're out. Once you're out of the dressing room it isn't the same anymore," Harrison said. "You're not part of that protected culture. I felt abandoned and lost and disappointed. Angry. I felt bitter, that I was betrayed by my coaching staff; that all my years of work were wasted."

Fortunately the police chief in his hometown of Timmins thought he had the makings of a good officer. Twenty-five years later he heads one of the Ontario Provincial Police's most successful drug prevention and education programs. Turns out he was better at saving lives than pucks.

Convery, meantime, has established a consulting business and conducts seminars for teams, organizations and mentors parents and athletes.

Harrison used the Quinnipiac program to learn about fundraising and public speaking and how to help build the local minor hockey program and to mentor youth on drug issues. "I honestly feel, that after retiring 25 years ago I'm finding a life after hockey. I've got a purpose again. I'm passionate about what I'm doing."

Quinnipiac also gives players a chance to re-establish old friendships. In his most recent program Harrison ran into Myre, his former goaltending partner. "You start sharing and realize your life isn't that different than theirs -- and of course there's some comfort," he says, laughing, "when you realize you're not the only one who got screwed by Harold Ballard."

IT'S ALL ACADEMIC

American student-athlete graduation rates for Division IA and IAA schools:

Head of the Class

1. Navy 98%
2. Boston College 96%
3. Notre Dame 95%
4. Stanford 94%
5. Wake Forest 93%
5. Duke 93%
5. Air Force 93%

Failing grades

204. Alabama 44%

204. Minnesota 44%

204. Cal 44%

214. Georgia 41%

216. Texas 40%

217. Arizona 39%