



On trading, OHL has a lot to learn

Players are also students, and under plenty of stress

By [STEVE SIMMONS](#) -- Toronto Sun

Why I wouldn't want my son playing in the Ontario Hockey League: They trade kids. They swap teenager for teenager. They preach education but think nothing of bartering young men just days away from exam time.

Yesterday, on the day kids returned to high school, a boy named Yves Bastien, who grew up in Northern Ontario and left home to learn his junior hockey and math in Kitchener, found out that he will now be living and playing and schooling in Peterborough.

Bastien is all of 17-years-old. This is his draft year. This is his professional ticket. Yes, the OHL treats these kids as though they are professionals. Except they don't pay them a whole lot of anything to be professional. Except most of them, the statistics show, will play low-level professional hockey and never any higher.

In fairness, the teams do provide educational packages for their players -- which has been a source of some controversy recently -- but that, on it own isn't enough.

"If there's one area we expose ourselves as not always serving (our players) it is in trading players," OHL commissioner David Branch said, clearly uncomfortable with the subject. "I am not one who is in favour of large-scale trading. I think there are valid reasons for some trades ... but we have to continue to find a way to make this right."

The OHL has experimented with moving its trading deadline and putting in trading blackout periods, but typically hockey people find their way around the spirit of the rules.

The league moved the deadline back in the hopes there would be fewer trades: Instead the opposite has occurred. Now they consider making further changes. Meanwhile, since the first of January, 11 different junior hockey players in the OHL have been traded at the busiest time of the school year. Final exams are a couple of weeks away. Final projects are due.

As any parent of a high school kid will tell you -- and I'm one of them -- this is a terribly stressful month at the best of times. Imagine piling on that stress by asking an unbalanced teenager -- which happens to the majority -- to pack up their bags, take their books, change billets, change cities, change teams, leave their friends behind, meet new coaches and teammates, and prepare for their calculus exams and independent study projects, all in the matter of a few days.

All of this in the name of building character and fostering education -- or so we're led to believe.

Peter DeBoer, the coach of the general manager of the Kitchener Rangers, was asked in light of the trading away of Yves Bastien if trading of any kind should be allowed in junior hockey?

"It's a good question," said DeBoer, who came away with Steve Downie in the deal. "I don't think there is a yes or no answer to that. I think we've looked at a lot of different things and tried to do what works best for everybody.

"Depending on the circumstances, there are situations when trades are mutually beneficial. It's a fine line, we purposely put our trade deadline right around the semester break so it's not disruptive."

Flaw in system

But trades can be made today, just like yesterday. Stan Butler, who is coach and GM of the Brampton Battalion, estimates that 70% of all junior hockey trades are requested by either the player, his family or his agent. This may be true, but it also reveals a further flaw in the system. Hockey people and even the myopic hockey parents -- which happens to be most -- continue to sell junior hockey as the best possible way to combine an education with professional development. They say their league, not U.S. college, is the way to go.

The numbers, however, would shock many a hockey parent. The 1997 Memorial Cup team from Hull dressed 31 players in their championship season: Two, Michael Ryder and Jiri Fischer, went on to become successful NHL players.

The Granby team that won a year earlier dressed 39 players in 1996: Two, Georges Laraque and Jason Doig, became marginal NHL players.

These are the best junior teams -- imagine the numbers from the worst.

It's hard enough for a kid to make it, to study on buses, to miss classes for road trips, to stay focused on hockey. Learning to fill out change of address cards should not be part of the education of these teenage hopefuls.
