

“So, You’re Saying There’s a Chance ...”: Understanding the Competitive Balance of Youth “Rep” Hockey in Ontario

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Competitive balance in sport is a desirable state for leagues to aspire to attain. Indeed, uncertainty of outcomes (Kringstad & Girginov, 2018) have been noted to be desirous. At the highest levels of professional sport, measures to promote competitive balance (e.g., amateur drafts, revenue sharing) are commonplace. It has been noted before (i.e., Wigfield & Chard, 2018) that competitive balance is similarly sought after in competitive youth sport settings. Here, the current study was completed to assess the competitive balance in various associations competing in Ontario’s boys’ representative minor hockey system. Results from the provincial championships since the 2005–06 season were analyzed for age groups ranging from U11 to U20 and across all competition levels (i.e., A, AA, AAA) by conducting a chi-square test of independence. Findings indicate that the Greater Toronto Hockey League (GTHL) dominates Ontario rep hockey across all age groups and competition levels—with few exceptions. This article offers an innovative solution to roster construction that Ontario minor hockey associations can implement to combat the GTHL’s dominance.

Keywords: youth hockey, competitive balance, chi-square

Introduction

A fundamental component of sport, from the professional ranks down to introductory levels of youth participation, is balanced competition. Indeed, at the highest levels of professional sport, league leaders in North America have regularly integrated measures to promote competitive balance including amateur drafts, salary caps, and revenue sharing (Mondal, 2023). This desire for

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competitive balance has been noted at the youth and amateur sport levels as well (Chard & Potwarka, 2017; Wigfield & Chard, 2018). Proponents of competitive youth sport argue benefits “such as commitment, work-ethic, discipline, and perseverance which are vital to perform and succeed in competitive settings” (Camiré, 2015, p. 32). Indeed, this idea that sport can teach such “life lessons” has been offered before (Rudd, 2005); however, environments in which a team has “no chance” or very limited prospects for success are not conducive to supporting this viewpoint. Thus, promotion of competitive balance is supported; however, this can only occur in settings in which there is a level of competition (Scelles et al., 2018) among all teams within a league structure. Here, while opponents vie for supremacy as competitors, they must also cooperate to organize the sporting product (Scelles et al., 2018). This cooperation includes the creation of league rules, standards, and policies to promote balanced competition. In turn, balance should lead to a higher degree of uncertainty of outcomes, a characteristic in most compelling sports leagues (Kringstad & Girginov, 2018).

While competitive balance research has been quite prolific at the professional level of men’s sports (e.g., Groot, 2008; Plumley et al., 2019), and a growing body of literature is emerging around competitive balance in women’s sports (i.e., Kringstad & Girginov, 2018; Mondal, 2023; Vales-Vazquez et al., 2017), a paucity of academic research exists on competitive balance in youth sports. Thus, the purpose of the current investigation is to examine the state of competitive (in) balance within an elite youth sport setting, specifically, within Ontario’s preeminent boy’s youth representative (“rep”) hockey association: the Ontario Hockey Federation (OHF). OHF members are delineated largely by geography and include the Ontario Minor Hockey Association (OMHA), ALLIANCE Hockey (ALLIANCE), the Greater Toronto Hockey League (GTHL), the Northern Ontario Hockey Association (NOHA), Hockey Eastern Ontario (HEO; AAA only), and the Ottawa District Minor Hockey Association (ODMHA). At the conclusion of each season, players in their “major” years (i.e., U11, U13, U15) congregate to compete for a culminating championship between each of the Associations’ championship teams. At the AAA level, teams compete for a Provincial Championship; at the AA and A levels, teams compete for an Ontario Hockey Federation (OHF) Championship. Further, only at the U16 age group, teams come together for a larger championship week—the OHL Cup—to provide exposure for players to teams in the Ontario Hockey League (OHL) and National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).

The researchers considered the competitive balance of rep hockey in Ontario by focusing on the success of each Associations’ respective winner(s) at culminating provincial finals. Here, enhanced understanding of policies in the

different Associations may be contributing to a lack of competitive balance at crowning events. For example, stacking capable players on teams in efforts to win championships and attract the attention of talent scouts (Campbell & Parcels, 2013; Davies, 2021; Fitz-Gerald, 2019) has been a common practice in the GTHL for years. Indeed, the Toronto Association does not implement any restrictions on where players in the Greater Toronto Area can play (i.e., based on geography of residence within the city); this autonomy allows for enterprising coaches and ambitious parents to assemble pseudo all-star teams within various organizations within the GTHL. Further, the GTHL has allowed its elite rep teams (AAA) to offer roster spots to players who do not live within the league's area—including international players (Davies, 2021; Westhead, 2016). While the GTHL's roster construction rules have been tightened since 2016 to eliminate international players from rosters, spots can still be offered to players who live in Ontario but outside of the Toronto area (Westhead, 2016). In an article written about superstar youth player Shane Wright, who resided outside of the GTHL's footprint, Kennedy (2018) addressed this notion of team stacking, saying, “in the intense world of Toronto minor hockey, attracting and keeping talents such as Wright can be a war” (para. 6).

Literature Review

Competitive Balance in Sport

Competitive balance is defined as the degree of parity among teams and preservation of uncertainty in game outcomes (Gómez-González et al., 2019). Sznajder (2010) considers competitive balance to be an essential issue linked to functioning sport organizations. Economists (e.g., Dietl et al., 2011; Fort, 2018; Késenne, 2000, 2004, 2006; Schmidt & Berri, 2001; Szymanski & Késenne, 2004; Zimbalist, 2002) have long argued that the competitive balance in a league has a direct impact on the financial drivers (i.e., fan interest, gate revenue, broadcast-related revenue) of professional sport organizations. As such, professional leagues have invested heavily in creating and maintaining competitive balance mechanisms like salary caps, luxury taxes, amateur drafts, and waiver claim priorities to ensure that their respective leagues achieve the greatest distribution of talent as possible (Plumley et al., 2019; Schmidt & Berri, 2001; Zimbalist, 2002.)

Within youth sport, the need to deliver meaningful sport experiences to participants and the economic interests of clubs are inherently linked in preserving competitive balance. Specifically, the best physical and mental health outcomes for youth sport participants have been established in those who participate meaningfully (Drenowatz et al., 2019). Surprenant (2021) gives examples of situations

to establish what meaningful participation looks like. For example, if someone is “nominally on a team but does not take the sport seriously” (para. 12-13) they are not seen as participating meaningfully. “Similarly, someone who takes a sport seriously but easily dominates all competition also does not participate meaningfully in competition” (para. 12-13).

In short, maintaining competition within youth sport programs may be inherent to a positive sport experience. Indeed, enrolling child(ren) into competitive sport programming where their offspring are challenged against similarly skilled players has been noted as a motivating factor for parents (Chard et al., 2015). Furthermore, having their child(ren) compete in evenly matched competition throughout a season or event increases the likelihood of parents being satisfied with their child(ren’s) sporting experience—regardless of result—and returning as a registrant (Wigfield & Chard, 2018). For programs that have maintained competition as a central feature—especially elite athlete development programs—understanding how organizations maintain competitive balance to maximize both their internal benefits (i.e., consistent registration fees) and deliver meaningful sport experiences is significant.

It is important to note that for competitive balance mechanisms to be effective, sports leagues—both youth and professional—must acknowledge the specific nature and manipulation opportunities of the resources that teams rely upon to establish competitive advantages. Failure to capture the manipulation of key resources in competitive balance mechanisms will result in them being ineffective. Specifically, within youth sport, stories of hyper-competitive parents looking to fast track their child(ren) to scholarships and professional athletic careers where roster manipulation tactics are employed are evident (Campbell & Parcels, 2013; Hyman, 2009). Here, the question as to whether youth sport leagues are being successful in delivering positive experiences through fair and balanced competition (Farrey, 2019; Fitz-Gerald, 2019; Torres & Hager, 2007) are natural. Indeed, with clubs, leagues, and governing bodies across all sports continuing to further embrace hyper-competition and the creation of all-star teams not bound to regional residency restrictions, the value of such experiences needs to be critically examined. As previously noted, enhanced competition may lead to more meaningful sporting experiences for participants, which may enhance the physical and psychological outcomes traditionally associated with youth sport (Drenowatz et al., 2019). However, as North American youth sport has become more hyper-competitive, rates of attrition—especially in teenagers—continue to rise rapidly (Young, 2021). Commonly cited reasons for the heightened attrition in youth sport are burnout (Young, 2021), overuse injuries (Brenner, 2016), and mental health concerns like depression or eating disorders

(Hammond et al., 2013). The prevalent outcomes associated with hyper-competitive nature of youth sport seems far from upholding the traditional physical, psychological, and social well-being benefits associated with participation (Bailey, 2006; Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). Therefore, guiding youth sport practitioners toward the establishment of programming that offers balanced roster construction and scheduling may be key in returning youth sport to its more idealistic form.

Method

The purpose of the current investigation was to determine the state of competitive (in)balance within an elite youth sport setting; specifically, we looked to uncover championship successes of boys associations competing in Ontario “rep” minor hockey. Ontario was selected as the province of analysis given its prominent place within Hockey Canada. To be sure, Hockey Canada (2022) reported 516,000 registered players for the 2021-22 season, with the largest enrollment achieved in Ontario with 175,772 players, or just over one third of total registrations.

Data Collection and Analysis

Results for each championship, including contest (OHF, Provincials, OHL Cup), age level (Atom-Juvenile), and corresponding age category (U11 – U20), competitive level (AAA, AA, A), team, association, and result (champion or finalist) for each season since 2005-06 were collected. Specifically, where available, results were gathered from OHF championship websites (<http://www.ohfchampionships.pointstreaksites.com/result>, <http://stats.pointstreak.com/players/players-leagues.html?leagueid=2096>, and <https://chl.ca/ohlcup/history-of-the-ohl-cup/>). Further, contact with the OHF league office was made to obtain results of championships that were not listed on the websites; the league office had data available for the OHF Championships beginning with the 2005-06 season. An example of one season’s results (2022-23) are shown in Table 1.

Individual seasons’ data were merged to form a comprehensive database containing all the seasons (2006 – 2023); this spreadsheet was analyzed using Tableau’s business analytics software. Here, crosstabs to ascertain counts of occurrences and percentages of championships and finals appearances were captured for each Association. Conducting a chi-square test of independence was also useful to determine whether Association and Championships were related to one another. Specifically, 16 OHL Cup finals (AAA U16), 48 Provincial finals (AAA U13, U15, U18), and 152 OHF finals (A - U11, U13, U15, U18, U20; AA - U11, U13, U15, U18; AAA U11) were considered.

Table 1. 2023 Championship and Finalist Results by Contest, Age, Competitive Level, Team, and Association

Year	Contest	Age Level	U Age	Birth Year	Competitive Level	Team	Association	Result
2023	OHF	PeeWee	U-13	2010	A	Essex Southpoint	Alliance	Champions
2023	OHF	PeeWee	U-13	2010	A	Centre Willington Fusion	OMHA	Finalist
2023	OHF	PeeWee	U-13	2010	AA	Mississauga Rattlers	GTHL	Champions
2023	OHF	PeeWee	U-13	2010	AA	Barrie Colts	OMHA	Finalist
2023	Provincials	PeeWee	U-13	2010	AAA	Markham Majors	OMHA	Champions
2023	Provincials	PeeWee	U-13	2010	AAA	Nickel City Jr. Sons	NOHA	Finalist
2023	OHF	Bantam	U-15	2008	A	London Jr. Knights	Alliance	Champions
2023	OHF	Bantam	U-15	2008	A	Woolwich Wildcats	OMHA	Finalist
2023	OHF	Bantam	U-15	2008	AA	Barrie Colts	OMHA	Champions
2023	OHF	Bantam	U-15	2008	AA	Sault Major Jr. Greyhounds	NOHA	Finalist
2023	Provincials	Bantam	U-15	2008	AAA	Vaughan Kings	GTHL	Champions
2023	Provincials	Bantam	U-15	2008	AAA	Sault Major Jr. Greyhounds	NOHA	Finalist
2023	OHL Cup	Minor Midget	U-16	2007	AAA	Toronto Jr. Canadiens	GTHL	Champions
2023	OHL Cup	Minor Midget	U-16	2007	AAA	Vaughan Kings	GTHL	Finalist
2023	OHF	Midget	U-18	2005	A	Woodstock Jr. Navy Vets	Alliance	Champions
2023	OHF	Midget	U-18	2005	A	Centre Willington Fusion	OMHA	Finalist
2023	OHF	Midget	U-18	2005	AA	Oakville Rangers	OMHA	Champions
2023	OHF	Midget	U-18	2005	AA	Waterloo Wolves	Alliance	Finalist
2023	Provincials	Midget	U-18	2005	AAA	Toronto Jr. Canadiens	GTHL	Champions
2023	Provincials	Midget	U-18	2005	AAA	Windsor Zone	Alliance	Finalist

Results

Overall, 216 Championship finals sanctioned by the Ontario Hockey Federation (OHF) from 2006 – 2023 were analyzed to better understand the competitive (in) balance within this elite youth hockey organization. Table 2 shows the overall breakdown of championship and finalist achievements for each Association, by absolute number and percentage. It is evident that the GTHL teams achieve the most success at these culminating championship events. Indeed, a GTHL team has won 50% of all championship events the past 16 years; further, GTHL teams have been finalists an additional 29% of the time.

Table 2. Overall Breakdown of Championships/Finalists by Association (actual numbers and %)

Association	Champions	Finalists	Total	%Champions	%Finalists	Combined
Alliance	33	50	83	15.3%	23.1%	19.2%
GTHL	108	63	171	50.0%	29.2%	39.6%
HEO/ODMHA	1	9	10	0.5%	4.2%	2.3%
NOHA	21	22	43	9.7%	10.2%	10.0%
OMHA	53	72	125	24.5%	33.3%	28.9%

Given the scarcity of championships won by the HEO/ODMHA Association (which only compete in the AAA events), it was removed from the chi-square analysis. Here, data clearly showed that there is a meaningful relationship between Association and the number of championships achieved in OHF events between 2006 – 2023, X^2 (df, $N = 432$) = 18.09, $p = .000421$.

Table 3 shows a more detailed breakdown of the championship information by including results at each Competitive Level (AAA, AA, A); again, the corresponding championship/finalist percentages are shown (i.e., of the 78 AAA championships, the ALLIANCE has won 7, or 9%). It is evident from the data that the GTHL has achieved superior results at the AAA level, winning 57 of the 78 championships (73%). The OMHA (12.8%) and the ALLIANCE (9%) win most of the remaining championships at AAA; the NOHA (3.8%) and HEO/ODMHA (1.3%) have won just three and one AAA championships, respectively.

The GTHL has achieved related success at the AA level as well, winning 50% of the 62 finals since 2006. The remaining 31 championships have been split between the OMHA (21%), ALLIANCE (12.9%), and the NOHA (16.1%). Of note, HEO/ODMHA do not compete in OHF championships events at the AA and A level.

The “A” level has been less fruitful for the GTHL, with a 26.3% winning percentage, trailing the OMHA, the clear leader at this competitive level (39.5%), and slightly ahead of the ALLIANCE (23.7%). The NOHA rounds out the most balanced competitive level in the OHF, winning 10% of the titles since 2006.

Examining the data at a more granular level—where consideration is given to the Association, Competitive level, and Age level/category (see Tables 4 – 6)—shows that, at the AAA level, GTHL teams exert a level of dominance at all age categories in OHF competitions. Specifically noteworthy, however, is the supremacy at the U15 and U16 age levels, where the association holds a 100% and 81% success rate, respectively, in achieving championships. Furthermore, at U16, GTHL teams are beaten in the finals 93.8% of the time; thus, GTHL teams account for 28 of the 32 teams competing in the OHL Cup finals (87.5%) over the past 16 years.

Considering the AA results at each age level/category, it is apparent that the GTHL enjoys a level of superiority at all age groups except U11, where the NOHA is clearly the preeminent association. This superiority is short-lived, as

Table 3. Championships and Finalists by Association and Competitive Level

		Competitive Level							
<i>Result</i>	<i>Association</i>	<i>AAA</i>	<i>AA</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>% Champs AAA</i>	<i>%Champs AA</i>	<i>%Champs A</i>	<i>Levels Combined</i>
Champions	Alliance	7	8	18	33	9.0%	12.9%	23.7%	15.5%
	GTHL	57	31	20	108	73.1%	50.0%	26.3%	50.0%
	HEO/ODMHA	1	–	–	1	1.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%
	NOHA	3	10	8	21	3.8%	16.1%	10.5%	9.7%
	OMHA	10	13	30	53	12.8%	21.0%	39.5%	24.5%
		78	62	76	216	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Finalist	Alliance	17	14	19	50	21.8%	22.6%	25.0%	23.1%
	GTHL	26	19	18	63	33.3%	30.6%	23.7%	29.2%
	HEO/ODMHA	9	–	–	9	11.5%	0.0%	0.0%	4.2%
	NOHA	8	6	8	22	10.3%	9.7%	10.5%	10.2%
	OMHA	18	23	31	72	23.1%	37.1%	40.8%	33.3%
		78	62	76	216	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 4. AAA Champions and Finalists by Association and Age Level

		AAA					
Result	Association	U-11	U-13	U-15	U-16	U-18	
		Atom	PeeWee	Bantam	M-Midget	Midget	
Champions	Alliance	2	3	-	-	2	
	GTHL	10	8	16	13	10	
	HEO/ODMHA	-	-	-	-	1	
	NOHA	-	-	-	-	3	
	OMHA	2	5	-	3	-	
Total		14	16	16	16	16	
		AAA					
Finalist	Alliance	4	4	3	1	5	
	GTHL	6	3	1	15	1	
	HEO/ODMHA	-	4	2	-	3	
	NOHA	-	2	5	-	1	
	OMHA	4	3	5	-	6	
Total		14	16	16	16	16	
		AAA					
		U-11	U-13	U-15	U-16	U-18	
		Atom	PeeWee	Bantam	M-Midget	Midget	
	Alliance	14.3%	18.8%	0.0%	0.0%	12.5%	
	GTHL	71.4%	50.0%	100.0%	81.3%	62.5%	
	HEO/ODMHA	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	6.3%	
	NOHA	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	18.8%	
	OMHA	14.3%	31.3%	0.0%	18.8%	0.0%	
Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
		AAA					
		U-11	U-13	U-15	U-16	U-18	
		Atom	PeeWee	Bantam	M-Midget	Midget	
	Alliance	28.6%	25.0%	18.8%	6.3%	31.3%	
	GTHL	42.9%	18.8%	6.3%	93.8%	6.3%	
	HEO/ODMHA	0.0%	25.0%	12.5%	0.0%	18.8%	
	NOHA	0.0%	12.5%	31.3%	0.0%	6.3%	
	OMHA	28.6%	18.8%	31.3%	0.0%	37.5%	
Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

the NOHA enjoys far less success after this initial championship age category, winning just two further championships from the 48 opportunities. Indeed, by U13 the GTHL (63%) and the OMHA (31%) emerge as the primary and secondary associations at this competitive level. As the participants age into U15 and U18, the ALLIANCE is the clear third pillar at AA, winning 19% and 13% of the championships at these upper age levels.

Table 5. AA Champions and Finalists by Association and Age Level

		AA					AA				
Result	Association	U-11 Atom	U-13 Peewee	U-15 Bantam	U-18 Midget	U-11 Atom	U-13 Peewee	U-15 Bantam	U-18 Midget		
Champions	Alliance	3	–	3	2	21%	0%	19%	13%		
	GTHL	2	10	9	10	14%	63%	56%	63%		
	NOHA	8	1	–	1	57%	6%	0%	6%		
	OMHA	1	5	4	3	7%	31%	25%	19%		
	Total	14	16	16	16	100%	100%	100%	100%		
Finalist	Alliance	2	5	3	4	14%	31%	19%	25%		
	GTHL	8	1	5	5	57%	6%	31%	31%		
	NOHA	1	2	1	2	7%	13%	6%	13%		
	OMHA	3	8	7	5	21%	50%	44%	31%		
	Total	14	16	16	16	100%	100%	100%	100%		

Finally, results for the A level of competition at OHF Championships since 2006 show a departure from the AAA and AA levels, where the GTHL achieved far greater successes than the other branches under the OHF umbrella. Indeed, not until the U20 level does the GTHL emerge as a force in A championship events. Indeed, the OMHA is the preeminent association at the youngest age category, winning 50% of the championships at U11. The remaining championships at this age are relatively evenly distributed between the NOHA (21%), GTHL (14%), and the ALLIANCE (14%). The OMHA remains the most triumphant association at U13 (44%) and U18 (50%), with the ALLIANCE growing in championship prominence (14%, 25%, 38%, 38%) between U11 and U18. Throughout the years, at U11 through U18, the competitive balance within A hockey is apparent; indeed, every association has enjoyed multiple championships.

Discussion

The findings reveal that as participant age and competition level increases, the GTHL becomes a dominant force in Ontario boys' rep hockey; here, it is apparent that competitive balance is lacking in Ontario's hockey system. Indeed, these results indicate a need for the governing bodies to revisit current structure/policies to ensure that meaningful participation is promoted.

In terms of the GTHL's dominance in the highest levels of rep hockey (i.e., AAA and AA), the GTHL couples servicing Canada's largest hockey playing population with limited residential restrictions on team building. Specifically, participants within the GTHL's regional boundaries are not restricted to play for the organization servicing their constituency (i.e., geographically); instead, they may play for any organization in the Association. Here, the ability of teams to stack talent from across its large regional footprint is evident; indeed, the strongest GTHL teams are likely to consist of players from all areas of Toronto's communities. The other associations across Ontario continue to maintain regional restrictions on roster construction, except for the OMHA's recent changes making it easier for its most elite players between U14 and U18 to play in the organization of their choosing (Davies, 2021); perhaps the OMHA loosening regional restrictions may come to enhance the competitive balance in Ontario's AAA rep hockey.

Conclusion and Innovative Ideas

Competitive balance is a concept that every youth sport league administrator should promote and aspire to attain. Almost a decade ago, Chard et al. (2015) found that a fundamental reason for parents to enroll their son into a youth rep hockey program was to learn *life lessons*. Importantly, these life lessons were

Table 6. A Champions and Finalists by Association and Age Level

		A										A				
Result	Association	U-11 Atom	U-13 PeeWee	U-15 Bantam	U-18 Midget	U-20 Juvenile	U-11 Atom	U-13 PeeWee	U-15 Bantam	U-18 Midget	U-20 Juvenile					
Champions	Alliance	2	4	6	6	–	14%	25%	38%	38%	0%					
	GTHL	2	3	3	2	10	14%	19%	19%	13%	71%					
	NOHA	3	2	3	–	–	21%	13%	19%	0%	0%					
	OMHA	7	7	4	8	4	50%	44%	25%	50%	29%					
	Total	14	16	16	16	14	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%					
Finalist	Alliance	2	8	3	6	–	14%	50%	19%	38%	0%					
	GTHL	2	–	5	3	8	14%	0%	31%	19%	57%					
	NOHA	5	1	2	–	–	36%	6%	13%	0%	0%					
	OMHA	5	7	6	7	6	36%	44%	38%	44%	43%					
	Total	14	16	16	16	14	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%					

thought to emerge from the application of *hard work* and *skill development*, both born from an environment based in *competition* and *being challenged*. Here, competitive balance is paramount and meaningful competition (Drenowatz et al., 2019; Surprenant, 2021), where uncertainty of outcomes exist (Sznajder, 2010), are necessary to enhance competition and challenge. To be sure, the OHF clearly ascribes to competitive balance, or it would not have stratified competitions (AAA, AA, A) based on skill level. Ensuring this balance and the “chance to win” via uncertainty of outcomes at championship events should be a goal for the umbrella league. To this end, innovation was long ago defined as “any idea, practice, or material artifact perceived as new by the relevant unit of adoption” (Zaltman et al., 1973, p. 10); stated more simply, Joachim et al. (2022) described it as “the pursuit of new ideas” (p. 429). In a community sport context, Hoerber et al. (2015) found that CSO leaders are actively looking for innovations to enhance program delivery; thus, promoting competitive balance would seem to be a worthy inclusion. Utilizing a design thinking approach, an early phase is to ideate and foster thinking or brainstorming to address problems or issues impacting an organization and/or its target market (Carlgren et al., 2016). As evidenced below, we ideate by offering two contradictory perspectives to address the competitive balance challenges currently experienced in Ontario’s youth rep boy’s hockey system.

Regionalize the GTHL and Maintain Residential Restrictions in Other Associations

The GTHL, based in Canada’s most populated city, has long eschewed the idea of residential restrictions on team construction. Reversing this position and having players compete for teams in geographic proximity to their place of residence would alleviate the “stacking” of teams. In theory, having residential restrictions in the GTHL would serve to balance the competition within that Association and thereby reduce the propensity of a championship team from this one Association to dominate at the provincial level. Taking a wider lens, recanting the open borders policy instituted in 2021 in the OMHA should maintain competitive balance within that Association. Indeed, in the article written by Davies (2021), a coach in the OMHA said, “I don’t believe it’s [open borders] a good thing for the culture of hockey ... We’re damaging the grassroots,” (para 10). At the very least, capping the number of import players was a suggestion that would seem to have merit and is supported by this study’s authors.

The concerns highlighted by coaches in Davies’ (2021) article align with those brought by scholars and journalists (e.g., Campbell & Parcels, 2013; Farrey, 2019; Hyman, 2009) who have analyzed the continuous enhancement and prioritization of competition in youth sport across North America. Indeed, those who

operate the OMHA, GTHL, as well as other highly competitive leagues in other sports feel their rules for roster construction ensure participants have a positive experience because competition and sport are inherently linked. However, as Farrey (2019) discovered in his review of the highly regarded Norwegian amateur sport system, youth sport is delivered by upholding the Children’s Rights in Sports, which minimizes high-level competition (i.e., regional or national championships) and travel teams prior to teenage years in an effort to prioritize coordination and development of social skill for all participants (Farrey, 2019). The benefit of such a policy is that the Norwegian sport system has not experienced the attrition and mental health issues impacting young athletes across North America (Farrey, 2019).

Embrace Regional Super Teams

Instead of demanding that governing bodies address the issue of competitive balance through policy and often easy-to-manipulate accountability mechanisms, this research team offers the alternative idea of simply embracing the formation of *super teams*. The propensity to pursue opportunities that may increase chances of playing hockey at the next level (see Campbell & Parcels, 2013; Fitz-Gerald, 2019) has long been demonstrated by families in elite Canadian hockey circles. Therefore, an opportunity may exist for either the governing associations discussed here, or an innovative entrepreneur, to create a high-performance training development league where residency rules are not applied to team construction, and competition is focused on showcase events. Here, the creation of regional “hubs” may be the answer whereby central locations, within an Association’s footprint, might be utilized as the base for all games/showcases that would transpire on the weekends. The accompanying map (see Figure 1) shows the sizeable geographic advantage that is apparent for the GTHL in a “borderless” offering. Regional hub locations in the other Associations would need to be carefully considered to capture the most players while demanding the least travel possible. The risk of losing “community” with players within participants’ local jurisdiction (negative) may be offset by the community built with like-minded players who would be seen weekly at the tournament-style showcase events (positive) throughout a season.

Currently in Canada, this super team model of delivering youth hockey is used in popular spring and summer (i.e., offseason) programs (Campbell & Parcels, 2013); thus, there is familiarity with the concept across Ontario’s minor hockey constituents. Furthermore, the super team model has also been successfully instituted by the Tier 1 Elite Hockey League in the United States. The Tier 1 Elite Hockey League consists of 22 teams across the US—many of which are linked to National Hockey League (NHL) teams (e.g., Anaheim Ducks, Buffalo

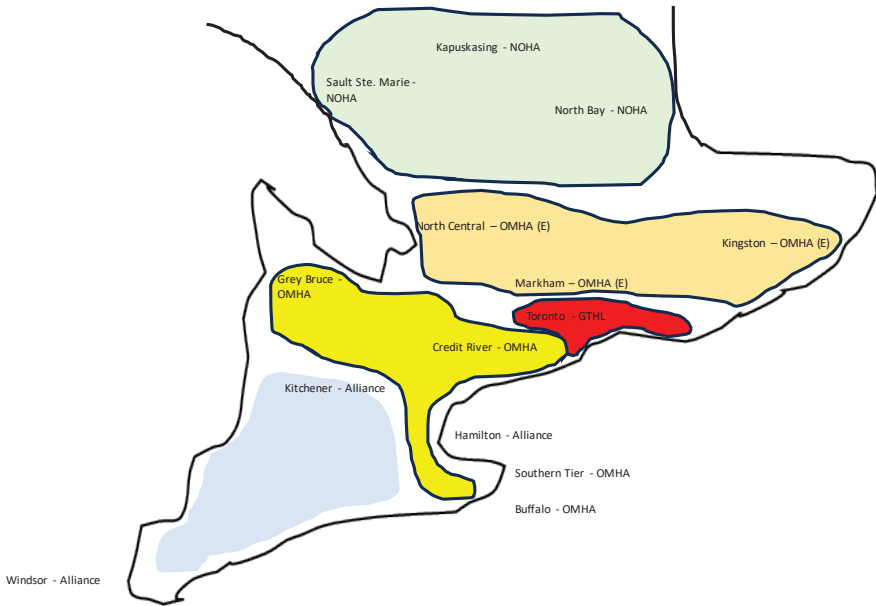


Figure 1. Map of Ontario Hockey Association's approximate geographic footprint.

Sabres, Dallas Stars, Los Angeles Kings)—offering elite development programming for players in age groups ranging from U14 – U18 (Tier 1 Elite, n.d). Teams in Tier 1 Elite Hockey are typically constructed with players across many geographic regions, which maintains a heightened competitive balance across the league. This model of athlete development has also worked to great success in baseball and basketball (Hyman, 2009). Creating a space that eliminates the environmental factors that can limit those most interested in pursuing the most intense form of meaningful participation from competing and training with each other could enhance competitive balance for amateur sport organizations. Instead of having to seek out like-minded individuals for intense sporting pursuits, housing these individuals in one place eliminates the need to manipulate rosters and rules to maximize meaningful participation for a small group of stakeholders. With competition more balanced across age groups and competition levels, meaningful participation is more likely to be achieved for a significantly larger group of participants (Surprenant, 2021). Furthermore, balancing competition and eliminating opportunities to stack rosters can increase the safety of high-contact sports because it prevents dominant athletes from exerting excessive force on, or having to navigate the unpredictability of, lesser competition; this has recently arisen as an issue in several Ontario hockey associations (Westhead, 2023).

Indeed, instituting a greater acceptance for the super team model across minor hockey in Ontario is worthy of consideration. Here, the culture of minor hockey already has a propensity to encourage traveling long distances and spending money to ensure that players develop (Campbell & Parcels, 2013; Fitz-Gerald, 2019). While the super team model seems like a good fit for the sport, practitioners considering its implementation should be mindful of some significant unintended consequences. First, while the adoption of the super team model would ensure the strongest and most balanced competition for the elite levels of minor hockey in Ontario, removing talented players from small, less resourced clubs—especially in rural areas—would have detrimental effects on the experiences taking place in those clubs. Losing talented players in such clubs at early ages could mean the players who remain have less meaningful experiences because their teams are less competitive, which could drive attrition at a young age and harm the longevity of the club. On a personal level, those who pursue super team opportunities may be more susceptible to the same physical, mental health, and sociological issues that impact high-performance athletes who must constantly travel and train (Brenner, 2016; Hammond et al., 2013). Second, as Chard and colleagues (2020) described, the scheduling of competitive minor hockey in Ontario can cause significant interference with participants' school attendance.

Future Research

This project demonstrates that by tracking championships or wins across clubs and associations over several seasons, administrators can garner insights on the effectiveness of policies that govern roster construction and competition within their respective organizations. Considering the link that competitive balance has in delivering meaningful sport experiences to youth, practitioners are called to remain updated on the impact of the results their youth teams are experiencing. The innovative solutions presented in this study (i.e., uniform regional roster restriction enforcement and accepting super teams) are specific to youth hockey in Ontario, as such solutions have already been implemented in other comparable hockey contexts. Future research on this topic in other hyper-competitive sporting contexts (e.g., soccer, basketball, baseball) would offer useful insights and potentially novel ideas that practitioners from across the industry can draw upon to address this issue. Additionally, the research team would like to see this line of research extended into girls' rep hockey in Ontario, other Canadian provinces, and in the United States; together, these extensions of the current project would provide further elucidation around competitive balance in this space. Finally, a qualitative investigation into the perspectives of parents and children on playing in uncompetitive environments (i.e., a team that has zero chance of winning, or conversely, is totally dominant) would be interesting.

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