

On the basis of this article, an abridgment in Finnish have been published in the *Liikunta & Tiede* Journal 5/2019.

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## A SPORT ONLY FOR RICH KIDS: THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION OF NORTH AMERICAN YOUTH HOCKEY

The headlines told the story:

“Cost of hockey leaves kids on the sidelines,” reported the *Toronto Star* in 1992.

“In the high-cost world of junior hockey, parents’ cold cash keeps their kids on ice,” declared the *Colorado Springs Gazette* that same year.

“You usually have to talk about children’s hockey with a calculator in hand,” reported a correspondent in Omsk in 2008.

“To play football, you need a ball,” remarked the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* in 2013. “To play hockey, you need money.”<sup>1</sup>

Since the ‘90s and ‘00s, youth hockey has become increasingly costly, for both boys and girls, in North America and Europe. Other youth sports, from tennis to soccer, have seen increases in cost in recent years. But hockey has become one of the most expensive sports for young athletes.

In the United States and Canada, the cost of youth hockey has soared, and it continues to climb. How expensive is the sport? In 2017 *Time* magazine reported the average annual cost for youth hockey in the United States was \$7013, nearly \$5000 more than what the average American family spends on youth sports in general. Recent investigative reports by Canadian newspapers showed that basic registration and team fees range from \$4500 to \$7000 per year. Private coaching, skills camps, and travel for tournaments can bring the annual cost to more than \$15,000. Hockey academies, like Okanagan Hockey Academy in British Columbia and Shattuck-St. Mary’s in

Minnesota, have tuition and fees ranging from \$35,000 to more than \$65,000. In comparison, a new Mercedes costs only \$57,000 and some change.<sup>2</sup>

Why is hockey in North America so expensive? In part, it is due to factors that are also driving costs in other hockey-playing lands, namely the expense of ice and equipment. But there are other factors distinct to the North American context, and in particular distinct to the United States, such as the chase for athletic scholarships to offset the rising cost of university tuition. In the U.S., even so-called public universities charge tens of thousands of dollars in tuition and fees.

While economic concerns are significant, I argue that the increase in hockey costs are driven primarily by demand—that is, the demand of parents for their children to advance, to excel. This demand comes out of a cultural shift in parenting, a shift that was itself the product of broader economic, social, and cultural developments in the United States and Canada: in particular, the transformation of youth programs after the end of the Baby Boom, economic cycles of growth and recession after the 1970s, greater attention to sports on television, and the influence of second-wave feminism, which brought a change in parents' outlook toward their daughters' activities. In this essay, I look at the first signs of this cultural shift in parenting in the 1980s, when we see the first instances of what is now common in hockey and other sports: year-round training with private coaching, and parents devising individual paths of development for their young athletes.

We will begin with this young athlete, 18-year-old **Pat LaFontaine**, who was featured in the magazine *Sports Illustrated* in 1983, the most widely read sports publication in the United States. *Sports Illustrated* occasionally features teenage athletes who are heralded as can't-miss stars of the future. For example, **LeBron James** was introduced to the world on the magazine's cover when he was still in high school. In the case of LaFontaine, *Sports Illustrated* profiled the Michigan native as one of the top prospects for the upcoming NHL draft.<sup>3</sup> LaFontaine ended up going third overall in the draft that year, to the New York Islanders. He went on to have a 15-year career in the NHL, leading ultimately to the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto.

What made LaFontaine a compelling subject for a magazine profile was not simply that he was a top American prospect, at a time when American players still had a small presence in the NHL, but that he was an American playing top-level major junior hockey in Canada. In fact, he was tearing

up his league. As a member of the Verdun Juniors in Quebec, LaFontaine broke scoring records that had been set by NHL great **Guy Lafleur**. He finished the seventy-game season with 104 goals and 130 assists, giving him the third-highest point total in league history. LaFontaine's scoring feats gained attention across Canada; he was interviewed between periods of *Hockey Night in Canada*, and prime minister **Pierre Trudeau** sent congratulations after he broke one of Lafleur's records. In the profile article, writer **Jack Falla** described how LaFontaine had become a celebrity in Verdun. Falla also devoted particular attention to LaFontaine's unusual path to professional hockey—unusual, that is, to American readers. Whereas in Canada it was customary for a teenage hockey player to leave home and join a major junior club in a distant city, in the United States it was not. Most hockey players, like young athletes in other sports, developed their skills in their community, with their high school team or local amateur club. LaFontaine had taken a bold step for an American teenager. He explained the move to Falla: “If I wanted to progress, I had to come here. Besides, I've known since I was a kid that I wanted to play pro hockey.”<sup>4</sup>

Pat LaFontaine's path to the NHL represented a significant shift in American sports. Rather than playing with a team in his community, staying with teammates he had known for years, he took an unexpected step to advance toward his career goal. His high school in Michigan did not have a hockey team, the Detroit-area midget league he had played in was not challenging enough (he had amassed over 300 points as a 16-year-old before leaving for Quebec). It was also customary for talented American hockey players to play for a university team on an athletic scholarship. But university hockey teams played only forty games compared to seventy in Canadian major juniors. For an aspiring pro player, one slated to be a first-round draft pick, the move made sense. Other talented American teenagers were making the same decision in their own sports at this time. The same year that LaFontaine was breaking records in Quebec, 13-year-old **Andre Agassi** moved across the country to train at the tennis academy **Nick Belletieri** had opened five years earlier in Florida. Fifteen-year-old **Mary Lou Retton** was preparing for the 1984 Olympics at Béla and Márta Károlyi's new gymnastics school in Houston, nearly 2,100 kilometers from her family's home in West Virginia.

Then, as now, this kind of individualized, professional training required a considerable investment. Today, a year at the IMG Academy in Florida, successor to Belletieri's tennis school, can cost more than \$80,000, depending on which sport your child plays (in comparison, a year's tuition at Harvard

costs \$68,000). In the early 1980s, Mary Lou Retton's father calculated that the family paid \$10,000 a year for her training in Houston. This was at a time when the median household income in the U.S. was \$22,000. "I'll say this," Retton's father said. "A poor person couldn't afford it."<sup>5</sup> The Retton family could afford it, as could the LaFontaine family. **John LaFontaine**, Pat's father, was an auto company executive. According to reporters who visited the family, their lakeside home in an affluent Detroit suburb was like a training facility. The elder LaFontaine spared no expense to develop the hockey talents of his two sons and the figure skating career of his daughter. He explained the decision to send Pat to Quebec as helping to fulfill his son's wishes. "Pat made it easy for us by being so sure about what he wants to do," said John LaFontaine.<sup>6</sup>

Decades earlier, a successful business executive would not have sought a career in pro sports for his son. Even in the 1980s, reporters covering Pat LaFontaine's record-breaking season with Verdun asked why his father went to such lengths to promote his sports career. Jack Falla raised the question in *Sports Illustrated* as to whether John LaFontaine, who had played hockey himself while growing up in Ontario, was "vicariously fulfilling his own admittedly frustrated hockey ambitions through the achievements of his sons."<sup>7</sup> Pat LaFontaine's mastery of interviews gave another reporter the impression "that his fame was carefully programmed, step by step, by his dad."<sup>8</sup> Today, sports writers no longer bat an eye at this kind of well-coached young athlete, whose parents commit family resources to his or her development. When *Sports Illustrated* covered hockey prospect **Auston Matthews** three decades later, the magazine did not question his parents' motives in sending him to Switzerland for a year prior to the NHL draft. In the early 1980s, however, this level of investment in a teenager's sports ambitions was unheard-of.

To be sure, parents' dedication to their children's athletic success was nothing new. The best example in hockey is that of **Walter Gretzky**, leading his son Wayne through nightly drills on the backyard rink. For men like Walter Gretzky, who worked repairing telephone lines, sports offered an escape for their sons from working-class life. But the children of business owners and executives were not escaping a future of manual labor. Instead, elite sports offered a path to greater wealth and celebrity. Stars of the early 1980s like Gretzky, **Joe Montana** in football, and **Magic Johnson** in basketball—and later Andre Agassi, Mary Lou Retton, and above all **Michael Jordan**—were a new type of athlete: well-spoken and well-dressed, attractive and rich. What financially secure parent would not want that kind of success for their child? Given that their own generation, the parents' generation, had achieved professional success, what then would their children accomplish? With material needs met, their children were free to fulfill their dreams. This was the common thread

among the ambitious young athletes of the time, as well as parents who supported them: They spoke of elite sports as a dream.

Young athletes coming from affluent families were also part of the changing social and economic landscape of North America. In the 1950s just over half of Americans and over 40 percent of Canadians worked in either industry or agriculture; by 1991, only twenty-nine percent of Americans and twenty-seven percent of Canadians worked in those sectors. In contrast, the commercial, finance, and service sectors of the economy accounted for half of the work force.<sup>9</sup> The demographic shift to the suburbs that began in the 1950s and 60s continued, with a majority of Americans living in suburban communities by the 1980s. Families were getting smaller. With greater household wealth and fewer children, parents could dedicate more resources to their children's pursuits. At the same time, youth programs that had expanded quickly to accommodate the Baby Boomers in the 1950s and 60s became more complex and specialized in the 1970s and 80s. Youth programs also became more entrepreneurial, since they had to attract participants from the smaller cohort of children after the Baby Boom. The select, competitive programs of the 1980s promised great benefits for these children, in particular professional coaching and the development of skills necessary for the next level.<sup>10</sup>

An example of these new youth sports programs was Compuware hockey in suburban Detroit. At the time, Compuware was one of the largest software companies in the United States having been founded in 1973 by **Peter Karmanos**. Karmanos was also a hockey fan. His three sons played, and his company sponsored teams in Detroit-area youth leagues. In the early 1980s he expanded the company's involvement: Compuware opened a summer hockey school, took over management of an ice arena, sponsored additional teams, and bought a Canadian major junior franchise in Windsor. By 1985, the company's hockey division was budgeting more than a half million dollars a year on its teams, coaches, and arena. Families had to increase their budgets as well. Said one of the Compuware team managers: "The parents have to spend a bit more, but if they truly want a chance at the NHL they have to get looked at."<sup>11</sup> And Compuware players got looked at. During the 1980s, ten of their former players reached the NHL. A scout for the Montreal Canadiens compared the Detroit-area program to the best in Canada: "There have good hockey organizations around Toronto and Montreal, but Compuware has to take the cake."<sup>12</sup>

Of course, a program with Compuware's success had its critics. Managers of rival organizations saw Karmanos' spending as creating an unfair advantage. Said the part-time coordinator of another Detroit-area program: "If I devoted 24 hours a day to hockey, I'd be a better coach, but I can't."<sup>13</sup> Some former players and their parents bristled at Karmanos' heavy-handed management style. Too much travel, too many games, too expensive, too specialized, too demanding, too focused on winning—Compuware, like other elite programs of the 1980s, drew criticism for professionalizing youth sports. Even those involved in pro sports objected. In a 1981 interview, Buffalo Sabres coach Scotty Bowman complained about the schedule his eight-year-old son endured. "They got him playing a 62-game schedule in Buffalo this year with road trips to Boston and Toronto," Bowman said. "Eight years old," he exclaimed.<sup>14</sup>

Stanley Cup-winning coaches might object, but entrepreneurs like Karmanos knew their market. Boys came from the East Coast and California to try out for Compuware teams in Michigan, with parents willing to foot the bill. When one teenage player from Alaska made a Compuware team, his parents moved the whole family to the Detroit area. "That's what I love about Americans," said his Canadian coach. "They're so drastic."<sup>15</sup>

Peter Karmanos found that one area of particular customer demand was summer hockey. He launched Compuware's summer hockey schools in 1981. Within three years, they were grossing \$400,000 per year. Summer hockey in North America was nothing new. Schools had been operating in Detroit and other cities since the 1950s, when NHL players offered lessons to local kids to supplement their salaries. By the '80s NHL players no longer needed extra income, but rink owners did, since ice had to be available in the summer for figure skaters. At both community arenas and privately-owned rinks, managers saw summer hockey as a way to offset the costs of maintaining the ice. Organizers promoted their summer programs as an opportunity for younger players to advance in ability and for older players to perform in front of scouts and coaches. The organizer of one Detroit-area league—a competitor to Compuware's summer program—said that the additional games gave players "hope for athletic scholarships."<sup>16</sup> One Florida entrepreneur opened a hockey school for young Canadians vacationing with their families during the winter holidays. A parent from Quebec explained the reason for signing up her son during the family stay at the Florida beach: "If a child gets away from hockey for a couple of weeks, it hurts his skating. You'd be surprised, they're behind the other kids."<sup>17</sup>

In understanding parents' motivations, this line is telling: "they're behind the other kids." North American society is much more competitive than in Europe, corresponding to its more laissez-faire free market economy. In the postwar decades, this social competition was notched up, as the demographic expansion of the Baby Boom exceeded available resources for activities and education. Parents of the Baby Boomers were also more involved in their children's activities than parents of previous generations; they were more concerned that their children be above-average. These trends accelerated in the 80s. White, suburban families in North America were smaller and more affluent. But this affluence was built atop anxiety. The Baby Boomers had been raised during two decades of uninterrupted economic growth. In contrast, the next generation, Gen X, came of age amid the transformation of the post-war industrial economy and a regular cycle of recessions. The competitive aspect of American and Canadian culture became more intense. The spoils of getting ahead were great. The risks of falling behind were real.

The individualized, career-oriented approach to youth sports arose in part from the middle-class anxiety evident in the 1980s. By the 2000s, the security of the middle class was made even more tenuous, especially in the wake of the 2008 global recession. In North America, a university education no longer guaranteed a secure career, as the labor market swelled with degree holders. In this more competitive environment, parents saw the need for their children to distinguish themselves. Success in sports, music, or other activities confirmed a young person's giftedness and motivation, while at the same time building social competence—the "life lessons" they needed to be successful adults. American sociologists have used the terms "concerted cultivation" and "orchestrated achievement" to describe this parenting strategy. Parents who engaged in these approaches saw sports and other activities as necessary preparation for admission to a distinguished university and then professional success. One American father stated it best in a study of contemporary parenting: "You've got to have something that makes you stand out. That makes you unique. Otherwise you're going to fall short."<sup>18</sup>

As parents seek to have their children stand out, they see extra training in sports as necessary. At the same time, coaches and club managers are savvy marketers. Their appeals play upon all of the dreams, fears, pride, and aspirations parents have for their children. One coach recruiting my

eleven-year-old son to a travel club asked why I would not do everything I could to foster his athletic talents. “He has a gift,” the coach told me. “Why wouldn’t you nurture that gift?”

Why does such an appeal work for so many parents? First of all, popular media tells us of successful athletes who dedicated themselves from a young age to reaching their dreams and whose families supported them every step of the way. This is the model we’re expected to follow. Second, there has been a shift in beliefs about child-rearing which emphasizes the sole responsibility of the parents—this is certainly the case in North America, and it is also evident in Europe. A result of this is that connections to club or community are often set aside; instead, players and parents themselves map the best route of advancement. In the Czech Republic, I heard from a hockey writer, the manager of a junior club, and an NHL scout, who all told me of parents taking their children from one club to another, buying coaches’ promises of more ice time and more visibility. Lastly, we still hold to the nineteenth-century belief that sport builds character, that participating in team sports instills in our daughters and sons the discipline, drive, and toughness they need for adult life. American parents often repeat the phrase that sport teaches their children “valuable life lessons.” This belief allows them to justify the commitment of money and time, no matter how steep.

At the same time, children’s success in sports confirms parents’ success. The volunteer dads and supportive moms of the Baby Boomers set a model for later generations of parents. Research shows that parents commit themselves to their children’s sports activities out of the sense that it is necessary in being a “good parent.” Just as children will “fall short” in contemporary society if they do not distinguish themselves, so do middle-class parents believe that they will not measure up in the estimation of their peers, if they do not commit themselves to their children’s success. Sociologist **Jay Coakley**, who conducted research on youth sports for more than three decades, sums this up:

“The achievements of children in an activity as visible and highly publicized as sports come to symbolize proof of one’s moral worth as a parent. Talented child athletes, therefore, become valuable moral capital in neighborhoods, communities, and the subcultures associated with high-performance youth sport programmes. This leads many parents to feel obligated to ‘invest’ in their



child's sport participation. Not to make this investment would be taken by many people as a sign of a parent's moral failure."<sup>19</sup>

Ultimately, it's all about winning. Beating out other kids for a spot on the team, getting more ice time, moving up to the next level. For those who keep on winning, there are prizes of real value: university scholarships, maybe even a shot at the pros. More valuable than money for many parents is the confirmation of status. The accomplishments of our children bring genuine joy, the undeniable biochemical surge that comes from seeing our offspring succeed. Even more than that, American parents want their children to win because it shows that they have won—that they are the better parent.

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**On the basis of this article, an abridgment in Finnish have been published in the Liikunta & Tiede Journal 5/2019: [www.lts.fi/liikunta-tiede/liikunta-tiede-lehti/liikunta-tiede-lehti-52019](http://www.lts.fi/liikunta-tiede/liikunta-tiede-lehti/liikunta-tiede-lehti-52019) (in Finnish).**

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