



PLAYERS FIRST

An interim report of the ongoing review to strengthen men's junior hockey in Ontario.

BRENDAN SHANAHAN

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PROJECT MANDATE

The recent NCAA eligibility changes have provided an opportunity for junior hockey in Ontario to evolve and adapt in a way that is beneficial to players, their families, the leagues, teams and communities.

Recognizing this timely opportunity to further strengthen men's junior hockey in Ontario while the landscape continues to evolve, we've asked Brendan Shanahan to lead this review and develop formal recommendations for junior hockey in Ontario moving forward.

To support his work, we've provided Brendan with four guiding principles to take into account:

1. Prioritize the needs, development and wellbeing of players at all levels of junior hockey in Ontario, with policies and frameworks that are rooted in healthy player experience

2. Foster collaboration across Hockey Canada, its Ontario Members and junior hockey stakeholders in the province to establish recommendations around a cohesive governance model with consistent, aligned development pathways, clear roles and responsibilities and a unified approach to junior hockey excellence

3. Maintain transparency and openness throughout the process, ensuring stakeholders are consulted and informed in decision-making to build confidence in renewed governance and the broader hockey system

4. Embed Hockey Canada's core values into his recommendations around governance structures and actions to be taken

In addition to conducting his own qualitative and quantitative research, Brendan will review existing studies on the re-imagining of the Canadian Development Model and previous reports from Ontario Member Branches on junior hockey in the province.

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INTRODUCTION

As an athlete, one of the greatest honours of my career was playing hockey for Team Canada. From winning the Canada Cup on home ice in 1991, to becoming world champions in Italy in 1994 and bringing home the gold medal at the Olympics in Salt Lake City in 2002, some of my fondest memories have come while representing our country on great teams and with fantastic teammates.

And that journey in the game started in Mimico, Ontario.

Growing up, I wasn't focused on where hockey would take me, but I knew I loved the game and simply wanted to play as much as I could. I thought that if I was lucky, I could follow the same paths that my older brothers were taking in hockey. Simply play alongside my neighbourhood friends and classmates as long as I could.

That all changed when I was 16.

I was drafted by the London Knights of the Ontario Hockey League in June and by the time September rolled around, I was ready to start Grade 11, living two hours from home with a billet family and enrolled in a new school without the friends and family structure I had known my entire life.

It turns out, it was the best thing that could have happened to me.

After two years with the Knights, I was drafted by the New Jersey Devils and made the NHL as an 18-year-old. There were new challenges awaiting me, but because of my experience in London and playing junior hockey in Ontario, I felt prepared.


I also know my experience could have been very different.

What if I wasn't ready to play in the OHL at 16? What if I hadn't been placed with such a caring billet family? What if I chose to stay home and play hockey for fun with my friends?

But no one's journey in the game is the same.

As much as we strive to develop future professional hockey players, we must also recognize that the vast majority of hockey players that come through our system will not play the game professionally. That doesn't mean they can't be taking advantage of the skills they've developed while playing hockey to provide for themselves and serve their communities for years to come.

It's no secret that the junior hockey landscape is evolving.



More than ever before, the focus is on the player and their experience, and that is a great thing. With that evolving landscape comes an incredible opportunity to take a step back and look for ways to improve.

How can we ensure junior hockey in Ontario is athlete-centred, development-focused and has clearer pathways across the province for players and their families?

To become stronger and more aligned, we need to develop further clarity for players and parents on how junior hockey operates in the province. If we truly want to improve the experience for junior hockey players in Ontario, they need to be supported on *and* off the ice to reach their full potential.

This will help sustain the success of the game, and create a better product for leagues, teams and communities.

At the same time, we know that Ontario's model is different than the other provinces and territories. With three Member Branches and multiple Junior A, B and C leagues, the development pathways are not always harmonized in all corners of Ontario, which has led to confusion from players, parents and quite honestly, the hockey world.

We want what's best for Ontario, and Ontario's junior hockey players.

So how can you help?

Throughout this review, we want to better understand the first-hand experiences of players, parents, alumni, billet families, administrators, volunteers, owners and team staff across junior hockey in the province.

From Dryden to Stouffville to Pembroke and every community in between, if you are passionate about junior hockey in Ontario, we want to hear from you.

The results from our **public survey** will help inform the recommendations to strengthen junior hockey in the province, and ensure Ontario remains a leader for years to come.

VISION

Junior hockey in Ontario is athlete-centred, development-focused and has clear, defined pathways across the province, regardless of jurisdiction.



STATE OF JUNIOR HOCKEY IN ONTARIO

Most of Hockey Canada's 13 Member Branches oversee hockey for their respective provinces and territories, however in Ontario, three Member Branches oversee hockey in different parts of the province: Hockey Eastern Ontario, Hockey Northwestern Ontario and the Ontario Hockey Federation.

Because of this, there are regional nuances to how the game is operated and delivered throughout the province, including at the junior hockey level.

Overall, there are 165 junior hockey teams across the nine junior hockey leagues in Ontario. Each league has its own commissioner or president, and volunteer board of directors.



Hockey Eastern Ontario

Headquartered in Ottawa, Hockey Eastern Ontario's jurisdiction is east of and including the Counties of Lanark, Renfrew and all of Leeds except the town of Gananoque and the portion west of Highway No. 32, and south of Highway No. 15.

At the junior hockey level, it oversees three leagues:

- Junior A:** Central Canada Hockey League
12 teams
- Junior B:** Eastern Ontario Junior Hockey League
13 teams
- Junior C:** National Capital Junior Hockey League
9 teams



Hockey Northwestern Ontario

Based in Thunder Bay, Hockey Northwestern Ontario is responsible for hockey from the Manitoba border to White River.

There are two junior leagues governed by Hockey Northwestern Ontario:

- Junior A:** Superior International Junior Hockey League 7 teams
- Junior B:** Lakehead Junior Hockey League
5 teams



Ontario Hockey Federation

The largest Hockey Canada Member Branch, the Ontario Hockey Federation is based in Cambridge.

The Ontario Hockey Federation has seven Members, including six involved with men's and boys' hockey: Minor Hockey Alliance of Ontario, Greater Toronto Hockey League, Northern Ontario Hockey Association, Ontario Hockey Association, Ontario Minor Hockey Association, and the Ontario Hockey League.

There are four junior leagues within the Ontario Hockey Federation's jurisdiction:

- Junior A:** Ontario Junior Hockey League 24 teams
- Junior A:** Northern Ontario Junior Hockey League
11 teams
- Junior B:** Greater Ontario Hockey League 23 teams
- Junior C:** Provincial Junior Hockey League 61 teams

While the Ontario Hockey League is one of the Ontario Hockey Federation's Members, it is governed by the Canadian Hockey League.

To help illustrate the state of junior hockey in Ontario, Hockey Canada has provided registration numbers for the 2025-26 season, as of February 1, 2026.

Across the 165 teams, there have been 5,548 players between the ages of 16 and 21, 19% of which are high school-aged players. The youngest average age for a league is 17.97 in the Junior B Eastern Ontario Junior Hockey League and the oldest is 19.23 for the Junior B Lakehead Junior Hockey League.

All four Junior A leagues have average ages between 18.28 and 18.87, while the Junior B Greater Ontario Hockey League's average player age is 18.01, and the other two Junior C leagues are over 19.

The number of Ontario-born players also is dramatically different between leagues, with the rest of the players coming from other provinces and the United States.

In Junior A, only 32% of players in the Superior International Junior Hockey League are from Ontario, while 88% of players in the Ontario Junior Hockey League are from inside the province. The percentage is 63% with the Central Canada Hockey League and 67% in the Northern Ontario Junior Hockey League.

At the Junior B level, players from Ontario represent 93% of the Greater Ontario Hockey League and Eastern Ontario Junior Hockey League, and 98% of Lakehead Junior Hockey League participants.

For Junior C, 99% of players in the Provincial Junior Hockey League are from Ontario and 95% in the National Capital Junior Hockey League.

With player movement, there are differences between all three levels.

Junior A teams in the Central Canada Hockey League average 39.3 players per season, which is the most in the province. The Ontario Junior Hockey League averages 38.8 players per team, the Northern Ontario Junior Hockey League 37.9 and the Superior International Junior Hockey League 37.1

Greater Ontario Hockey League and Eastern Ontario Junior Hockey League teams average 32.2 players per team, and the other Junior B league – the Lakehead Junior Hockey League – averages 31.0, the lowest in the province.

In Junior C, the National Capital Region Junior Hockey League averages 34.3 players per team and the Provincial Junior Hockey League averages 31.5.

Overall, this data shows that players at the Junior B and C levels are overwhelmingly Ontario-based, and that out-of-province participation is concentrated in specific Junior A leagues.

These Junior A leagues also skew younger for average player age and have more roster changes, while the Junior B and C leagues trend older and have less player movement.

HYPOTHESIS ON CURRENT PAIN POINTS

After beginning preliminary research, including reviewing existing studies on the Canadian Development Model and by Hockey Canada's Ontario Members, there are five reappearing pillars that appear to be impacting the player experience across junior hockey in Ontario:

**1.
Player Movement
and Pathways**

**2.
Training and
Competition
Standards**

**3.
Safety, Wellbeing
and Healthy
Culture**

**4.
Off-Ice
Experience**

**5.
Financial
Accessibility
and Equity**

1. Player Movement and Pathways

Clarity and consistency of structures, policies and processes around how players enter, exit and move between different levels and leagues.

Key elements of the player experience:

- Player movement policies
- Player pathways
- Structure of junior hockey

Current state:

- Limited transparency and communication around development and pathways leave players and families uncertain about options, risks and long-term implications of decisions
- Ambiguous and overlapping league roles have created increased uncertainty and intense competition for players

Ideal player experience:

Players experience a transparent and harmonized junior hockey ecosystem with clearly defined league roles, level-appropriate player movement policies and well-designed and communicated pathways for all players, each of which empower players and their families to make informed choices and confidently navigate their development journey.



Guiding questions:

- How do player experiences differ between junior hockey leagues?
- What are the roles of leagues in a more unified structure?
- How can government support elevate junior hockey in Ontario and what role does the Province of Ontario play in the model?
- What role can U SPORTS play in junior hockey and how does U SPORTS fit in the journeys of current players?

2. Training and Competition Standards

Quality and consistency of day-to-day training and competition for players' core hockey development.

Key elements of the player experience:

- Access to and quality of facilities
- Scheduling demands
- Access to resources
- Coaching and officiating quality

Current state:

- Varying operating standards across leagues and teams produce inconsistent daily training environments and competition quality
- Siloed processes and minimal communication around development objectives between levels of play results in fragmentation, limiting player development, progression and next-level readiness

Ideal player experience:

Players experience a unified junior hockey system that consistently puts player development at the heart of everything it does. This includes high-quality and competitive daily training, equitable access to facilities, coaches focused on player development and balanced scheduling to help sustain player performance and long-term progression, with all players having an equitable ability to strive for on-ice and off-ice success.

Guiding questions:

- How can coaches be better supported and what coaching factors most impact player experiences?
- What can be done to ensure safe and consistent playing standards, regardless of the level of junior hockey?
- What impact do facilities in junior hockey in Ontario and how do we think differently about infrastructure?

3. Safety, Wellbeing and Healthy Culture

Protocols that ensure players' physical and psychological safety and wellbeing, and a healthy hockey culture on and off the ice.

Key elements of the player experience:

- Health and injury management
- Safe sport
- Protection and reporting

Current state:

- Some playing environments that contribute to negative interactions, burnout and player retirement
- A lack of unified standards and access to health and wellbeing support across teams and leagues lead to variable player experiences and care

Ideal player experience:

Players and those around them experience hockey environments that uphold consistent safety standards, provide comprehensive physical and psychological wellbeing resources and foster a positive culture on and off the ice.

Guiding questions:

- How do we limit the burnout of junior hockey players?
- What consistent, off-ice standards could enhance the player experience across junior hockey in Ontario?
- Is the system currently designed to promote a healthy hockey culture?



4. Off-Ice Experience

Off-Ice aspects of a player's life that promote holistic development and positive experiences.

Key elements of the player experience:

- Academic and vocational support
- Community leadership
- Personal and professional growth

Current state:

- Focus solely on on-ice performance can result in inconsistent support and off-ice resources available on top of heavy travel and relocation demands which can drive players away from the game
- Targeted educational support exists in some leagues, providing valuable resources for many players, though opportunities are not consistent across all levels

Ideal player experience:

Players experience balanced lifestyles and holistic development that integrates academic support, personal and professional growth and community leadership opportunities with their on-ice development, ensuring consistent access to resources that prepare players for success in hockey and beyond.

Guiding questions:

- Is it better for younger players to play at, or close to home?
- What makes a successful billeting experience?
- How can development be enhanced through billeting?
- How can high school and post-secondary opportunities be considered?

5. Financial Accessibility and Equity

Affordability of junior hockey and financial models that influence equitable player access and participation.

Key elements of the player experience:

- Cost structure
- Team financial models
- Financial support
- Equity and accessibility

Current state:

- Uneven player fees across junior leagues and teams can create financial barriers that inhibit participation and lead to player attrition, while some leagues that are eliminating fees are seeing increased popularity and competitiveness
- Different franchise models across junior teams can create an unequal playing field for franchises and disparities in the value provided to players, while adding complexity to systemic change

Ideal player experience:

Players experience equitable and affordable access to junior hockey through sustainable financial models that reduce cost barriers and provide transparent and fair fee structures, ensuring all players receive value and have consistent experiences within each level of junior hockey, regardless of their financial background or where they play.

Guiding questions:

- Can the inconsistent player fee structures be addressed based on the various franchise models across the province?
- Does eliminating player fees improve the on-ice talent in certain leagues?
- How have franchise values been impacted by the recent changes to post-secondary player eligibility?



NEXT STEPS

Anyone who is – or has been – involved with junior hockey in Ontario can have their voice heard through our **public survey**, which is open until Feb. 24 at 11:59 p.m. ET.

It takes approximately 10 minutes to complete and includes an open-ended question designed for you to share your experience with the game.

While this is ongoing, I continue to meet with governing bodies, leagues and stakeholders from across the province to better understand their successes, visions for the future, and opportunities for growth on the road to providing formal recommendations to the governance committee this spring.

The recommendations will be published by Hockey Canada and its three Ontario Members.

I am incredibly optimistic that together, we can make our game even greater for the next generation of athletes on and off the ice.

Thank you,

Brendan Shanahan