

NEWS

WHY IT MIGHT BE A GOOD THING FOR JUNIOR TEAMS TO PAY MINIMUM WAGE - AND BE FEWER OF THEM



By: Ken Campbell
Jul 7, 2016



QMJHL action (Photo by Francois Laplante/Freestyle Photo/Getty Images)
Author: The Hockey News

A class-action lawsuit and a recent decision by the Nova Scotia provincial government once again raises the question of whether major junior hockey players should be paid minimum wage.

Let's get one thing out of the way immediately. I am not comparing junior hockey teams to sweatshops. That would be ridiculous. But it seems the arguments we've been hearing lately to keep junior hockey from paying its players minimum wage has some parallels to those who defend sweatshops.

There are those who will point out that as bad as sweatshops are, they're a lot better than the alternative for a good number of people. Pulling a rickshaw or working the land for even less money than people make in a sweatshop can make the case for them a little more compelling. There have been

those who have opined that some people in Third World countries are, in fact, better off because of the existence of sweatshops.

So what does this have to do with junior hockey? Well, excellent reporting by Rick Westhead of TSN on a class-action lawsuit by former players against the CHL and a recent decision by the provincial government in Nova Scotia exempting Quebec League teams from paying minimum wage have revived the argument about whether the 60 teams in the Canadian Hockey League should be paying their players more.

Junior hockey operators, to the surprise of no one, are warning that paying minimum wage would represent the death knell for many franchises. In the province of Nova Scotia news release announcing its decision, Halifax Mooseheads owner Bobby Smith said that, "paying minimum wage for all the athletes' time, including practice or travel, would make it difficult for teams to operate. We want to ensure our athletes continue to have opportunities to develop athletically and play sports for Nova Scotia-based teams."

Where do we start with that one? Well, first of all, of the 51 players who were listed on the rosters for the two Nova Scotia-based QMJHL teams – the Mooseheads and the Cape Breton Screaming Eagles – just nine of them are from Nova Scotia. The Screaming Eagles, in fact, had as many players from Russia (two) as they had from Nova Scotia.

But you see what the end game is here, right? Smith is arguing that without junior hockey paying its players next to nothing, there would be no league in which these teenagers could play and develop. They wouldn't be pulling rickshaws, but they would be playing in lower leagues. QMJHL commissioner Gilles Courteau also chimed in, saying the league has never considered its players employees. According to Courteau, "they are student athletes playing the game they love at the highest level of hockey for their age. You're not there to make money."

And if you jeopardize their existence by driving up the cost of doing business, well, then there won't be a business. What happens then? Well, first of all, all those kids playing the game they love will suffer because they'll all be chasing fewer roster spots when teams are forced out of business. And if you live in Swift Current or Owen Sound or Rimouski, you might have to find another way to occupy yourself on those cold Friday nights in January.

Nobody really knows how much money there is in junior hockey because the teams that are privately owned are not compelled to open their books. CHL president David Branch once told me that in any given year, one-third of the team make money, one-third break even and one-third lose money. Those teams often move categories based on where they are in their competitive cycle. It's safe to say that for every London Knights there is a Swift Current Broncos. Some make piles of money, some lose piles of money. Players make nothing close to minimum wage, but have all their living expenses paid and receive scholarship money that can be used if they pursue post-secondary education after their junior careers. So, here's a novel idea. Why not pay the players better wages and either share revenues or simply allow the teams that cannot afford to pay them drop out of the business? Why should some of the most talented teenaged hockey players in the world be made to accept less because the business model doesn't work in some towns?

It's not as though the CHL is producing NHL players at such a prodigious rate that it can't keep up with the demand. On average, you can expect two or three players per team to become full-time NHL players once their junior careers end. The vast majority of kids who play major junior hockey don't go on to any

level of pro hockey. So if those 20 teams that consistently lose money were not in the picture, would it actually make a difference in producing NHL players?

Heck, yeah, it would. In fact, your trusty correspondent would argue that, in fact, it might produce more. One of the problems with junior hockey is there are too many teams and there is a lack of depth of talent. Having fewer teams would raise the quality of play in all three leagues and might actually make the players in them better because they'd consistently be facing better competition. And that would probably more adequately prepare them for playing in the NHL. It's more difficult to develop bad habits when you know there are no nights off.

And if the small markets of junior hockey want to stay in the action, perhaps it's up to their fans to pay for it. Would people in Moose Jaw or Prince Albert or Rouyn-Noranda be willing to pay \$5 or \$10 more per ticket for the privilege of having a junior hockey team? If so, they'll do it through good times and bad. If not, perhaps they're playing out of their league in the first place. And having fewer of them around would not diminish the product one bit. It would, in fact, make it better.

TAGS

[MAJOR JUNIOR](#)

[NHL](#)

[PROSPECTS](#)

COMMENTS

0 Comments

Sort by



Add a comment...

 [Facebook Comments Plugin](#)

SPONSORED CONTENT

Recommended by