

THE WINDSOR STAR

Scott Stinson: Spectre of junior hockey litigation hangs over world tournament

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The size and scope of this year's IIHF World Junior Championship is not just indicated by the fact that Canada's announcement of a selection camp roster was a media event, but by the fact that it was televised live nationally. Actually, even the term "selection camp" is a bit of a misnomer: It's the National Junior Team SportChek Selection Camp.

In Canada, for this event, even the training camp has a title sponsor.

When Tom Renney, the new president and chief executive of Hockey Canada, kicked off the press conference on Monday afternoon, he made sure to thank the event's sponsors, which include a bank, an oil company, a telecom outfit, and the world's biggest sporting apparel company.

Two hours later, organizers announced a "very limited number" of ticket packages would be released for the slate of games in Toronto, which range from \$626 for 19 games in the cheap seats to \$2,300 for premium seats in the lower bowl of the Air Canada Centre.

In Montreal, which does not host the medal-round games but does get Team Canada in its preliminary round matches, organizers have already moved on to selling single-game tickets. As of Monday afternoon, ice-level seats were available for Canada's Dec. 26 opener against Slovakia for \$250 a pop.

So big money is being thrown around to stage an event at two NHL-size arenas in two tremendous hockey markets. Of course, the participants will see none of it. That's not a surprise or even a problem, since athletes in all kinds of sports occasionally play in international tournaments for little other than love of country, but this year's edition of the World Junior Championship happens to come while junior hockey is under a great deal of scrutiny.

A class-action lawsuit filed in a Toronto court in late October accuses the Canadian Hockey League and its teams of violating minimum-wage laws, charging that players are effectively employees who can work up to 60 hours a week and receive as little as a \$50 weekly stipend (the CHL has said it will defend itself vigorously. The league's position is players are amateur athletes who receive benefits far in excess of the stipend — which can now run up to about \$400 a month — including meals, housing and access to a scholarship fund).

Meanwhile, a former player has sued the WHL and the QMJHL, two of the regional leagues that comprise the CHL, alleging they attempted to obscure his employee-employer relationship to avoid paying him at least minimum wage. Neither lawsuit has been tested in court. And Canada's largest private-sector union, Unifor, is leading the effort to form a players' association for junior hockey, making many of the same arguments that are the basis for the lawsuits: basically, that teenagers are being exploited while teams make piles of money. Lastly, at least two U.S. states have reportedly begun looking at whether junior hockey teams are in violation of their labour laws.

None of this will necessarily amount to anything, but the challenges to the junior hockey business model have a lot more heft to them than the shadowy and farcical attempt to form a players' association two years ago. And none of it has anything directly to do with the World Juniors, other than the fact that the CHL's best players will compete in it, and some revenues from the event will ultimately flow back to the league. The last time the WJC was held in Canada, a reported \$6 million went back to the CHL and its teams out of an estimated \$22 million in profits.

The timing is probably just coincidental, but here is junior hockey, poised to put on its most lucrative showcase yet, even as the industry fights off accusation that it makes millions on the backs of kids who don't know any better than to ask for a bigger cut. At the least, it's awkward.

(This corner's opinion: The present system does have obvious inequities, but because team finances are opaque, there's no way for an outsider to know whether the desired reforms would cripple all but the wealthiest franchises).

None of that was a topic of discussion on Monday. Team Canada has enough storylines to keep everyone interested, from the broken-but-healing hand of would-be star Connor McDavid — officials said they expect him in the lineup on Dec. 26, pending a medical check next week — to the foursome of players who may or may not be loaned to the national program by the NHL clubs for whom they are presently working.

Hockey Canada's Bruce Hamilton said the teams of Bo Horvat (Vancouver), Jonathan Drouin (Tampa Bay), Curtis Lazar (Ottawa) and Anthony Duclair (NY Rangers) have until Dec. 19 to make their decisions. "They are not saying no at this point," Hamilton said. And though the selection camp will include exhibition games against university all-stars, Team Canada staff said they would welcome the NHLers even if they wouldn't get much chance to practise or play with the national squad. As is the case with McDavid.

"If Connor McDavid joins us on the 20th, we will be very happy to find him a spot. And linemates," said head coach Benoit Groulx, whose day job has him behind the bench of the Gatineau Olympiques.

As for underagers left off the camp list like Josh Ho-Sang and Dylan Strome, team director of player personnel Ryan Jankowski simply offered that such players were "not quite there yet" and "they will have their opportunity."

Injury questions, NHL loaners, roster omissions: all very typical stuff to kick off WJC season, in these atypical times for junior hockey.