The Effect of Professional Sports Success on Youth Participation: Growing the Game of Women's Ice Hockey

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THE EFFECT OF PROFESSIONAL SPORTS SUCCESS ON YOUTH PARTICIPATION:
GROWING THE GAME OF WOMEN'S ICE HOCKEY

By

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of the Requirements for
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Thesis Summary

In February of 2018, the United States Women’s National Ice Hockey Team (Team USA) won gold at the Winter Olympics for the first time since 1998. The problem surrounds the unique components of the sport of ice hockey and identifying how to capitalize on international success to increase youth participation. The purpose of this study is to 1) identify the components needed to grow the game of female youth ice hockey, and in doing so, 2) identify the main barriers inhibiting the growth of female youth ice hockey. The research relies on semi-structured interviews with ice hockey experts including current and former Team USA players and youth hockey coaches and administrators. The information gathered was organized into concept maps and led to the identification of eleven components of growing the game of ice hockey, eight barriers, six intangible benefits, and six additional concepts relating to the growth of youth female ice hockey labeled as “additional phrases”. The research suggests committed and intentional involvement in youth ice hockey programs by governing bodies and professional players is needed to grow the game of hockey. In conclusion, research studies on female youth and professional ice hockey are still needed as sports and society are constantly changing, so the growth components and barriers are constantly evolving.
Introduction

Twenty years ago, at the 1998 Winter Olympic Games, women’s ice hockey was featured in competition for the first time, and the United States Women’s Ice Hockey Team (Team USA) won gold. Since 1998, total participation in female ice hockey in the United States has grown from a total of 28,346 USA Hockey female registrants (USA Hockey, 1998) to more than 79,355 today (USA Hockey, 2018). Even more promising is the rate of growth for women’s registrations in the 2017-18 season being “nearly 6.5 times greater than the growth of men’s registrations” (Murphy, 2018). “Growing the game” has transformed into the “main directive behind almost all change and development in women’s hockey” (Haase, 2016). This refers to everything from increasing youth participation, to the addition of college programs, to increasing spectator attendance at all levels. According to Gulbin, et al., the average age elite level athletes first participated in entry-level competition for their particular team sport was 7.99 years old (2010). The knowledge of the game acquired at this age can lead to athletic success down the road or at least, facilitate the development of a young fan base. This indicates the importance of growing the game starting with grassroots introductory programs, emphasizing the most basic fundamental skills, and youth participation. Exposure to the sport is critical to gain the attention of parents and kids alike, whether it be a successful national team or friends inviting friends to the rink to try the game for the first time.

In February of 2018, Team USA won gold at the Winter Olympics, for only the second time since 1998, beating Canada in a skillful and emotional shootout. In one post-game interview, Jocelyne Lamoureux-Davidson, who scored the game winning shootout goal, credited her dreams of being at the pinnacle of sport to watching Team USA win an
Olympic gold medal for the first time in 1998, and ironically, the 1999 USWNT win the World Cup (ESPN). Jocelyne and her twin sister, Monique Lamoureux-Morando, who scored the equalizing goal in the third period, were only eight years old in 1998. Twenty years later, they are the Olympic gold medalists inspiring the next generation of female youth hockey players.

Since the 2018 Winter Olympics, Team USA players have made appearances at games and schools, coached at youth camps, and even competed in the NHL All-Star weekend in San Jose. Team USA player and two-time Olympic medalists, Kendall Coyne Schofield, competed against the best male hockey players in the world in the NHL Skills Competition in the fastest skater round. Although she did not win, ESPN named her performance the best of the weekend (Kaplan, 2019). Articles from NBC, The Washington Post, and the New Yorker have praised the skill and professionalism of Coyne Schofield along with her fellow Team USA teammates. The support from sports journalist, fans, and hockey equipment companies like CCM has been crucial in providing exposure to the athletes and the sport and continues to prove the importance of capitalizing on the exposure to grow the game.

In February of 2019, almost exactly a year-to-date since the 2018 Winter Olympic opening ceremonies, fans gathered to take pictures and get autographs with professional women’s ice hockey players in Nashville. It was the All-Star weekend for the National Women’s Hockey League (NWHL), a five-team league featuring some of the best women’s hockey players in the world. A girl’s 10 and Under youth hockey team from St. Louis, a men’s club college hockey team from the University of South Carolina, and Nashville Predators fans made up some of the spectators for the weekend. Former
Nashville Predators goalie, Chris Mason, coached the NWHL All-Star game and claimed it was not until his daughters saw these women play did they ask to play hockey. “When [my daughters] look at these women, they see themselves,” he said, and it’s apparent his young girls, and many like them, need elite role models to look up to (Batten, 2019).

A popular NHL initiative sums it up: “Hockey Is For Everyone”. No matter the barriers, who you are, or where you have started, hockey is for everyone. The NHL, with USA Hockey and Hockey Canada partners, strives to “provide a safe, positive and inclusive environment for players and families regardless of race, color, religion, national origin, gender, disability, sexual orientation and socio-economic status” (NHL). The month of February is the annual campaign month to focus on and celebrate this initiative.

A primary motivation to promote athletics to young girls should be the diverse community gained and characteristics learned from participation. The self-esteem, “social success, positive peer relationships, and leadership skills” sports promote can lead to success both on and off the ice (Fraser-Thomas, 2005). Giving young female athletes the chance, the resources, and the encouragement is needed to spread awareness of the importance of sport.

Like many sports and other extracurricular activities, there are many obstacles hindering the growth of women’s ice hockey. Despite the achievements of Team USA and USA Hockey, the barriers to ice hockey can be challenging to overcome. Potential barriers like 1) geographical reach, 2) financial obligation, 3) existing gender patterns, and 4) number of suitable facilities create obstacles that can discourage players from starting and continuing to play (Adams, 2018). These unique barriers can make it difficult to compare the game of ice hockey to other sports. As applicable, throughout this study
discussing the growth of women’s ice hockey, comparisons to the success of the Unites States Women’s National Soccer Team (USWNT) in international competitions may be examined. These comparisons will be important in identifying specific components USA Hockey can learn, adapt to, and interpret from USA Soccer, and how USA Hockey can sustain momentum in regards to youth participation and team awareness between international tournaments.

The purpose of this study is to 1) identify the components needed to grow the game of ice hockey, and in doing so, 2) identify the main barriers inhibiting the growth of ice hockey. The concentration of the study is on youth female ice hockey in non-traditional markets such as Dallas, Phoenix, and Nashville. Identifying how Team USA and USA Hockey can capitalize on their success at the 2018 Winter Olympics, or if the success at international competition has any effect at all on youth participation will be a primary focus. Can USA Hockey duplicate the success of USA Soccer in regards to team awareness, individual branding, and youth participation? Overall, what factors impact female youth ice hockey participation, and will the success at international competition have a lasting impact on the sport?

**Literature Review**

The first International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) Women’s World Championship was held in March of 1990, and the first International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) Women’s World Cup was held in 1991. Eight years after the inaugural FIFA Women’s World Cup, the USWNT won their second gold medal at the Rose Bowl Stadium in California. The dramatic shootout win over China ended in Brandi Chastain tearing off her jersey and falling to her knees with excitement. After this
success, the USWNT “achieved fame and adoration levels matched only by the 1980 [Men’s] U.S. Olympic Hockey Team,” and the players became instant household names (Taylor, 2000). The media coverage of the USWNT before, during, and after the 1999 World Cup proved there could be successful branding of female team sports and female athletes, which could lead to “better conditions for the next generation of women to play” (Coombs, 2014). This media coverage was new, as “team sports [were] generally perceived as masculine” and aggressive, and therefore, undesirable for American consumption (Shugart, 2003). “Endorsements and marketing opportunities that come with success can lead to broader improvements” and grow the sport, whether it be soccer or ice hockey (Coombs, 2014). USA Soccer capitalized on the success of the team and individual athletes’ popularity to pave the way for female soccer for generations.

Ice hockey is a sport “as far removed from the ‘sex-appropriate’ criteria for women as a sport can be” because of its reputation for extreme violence and aggression (Shugart, 2003). The notion of “reconstructing the dominant definition” of masculinity associated with ice hockey has emerged and continues to persist (Pelak, 2002). It may be that “women in the game today are more tolerated than respected” but female participation has grown at almost all levels of the sport (Theberge, 2000).

A major problem with the sport of ice hockey and a large difference between ice hockey and soccer is the equipment and the ice. The “most critical resource in hockey is ice time” and the unequal “distribution of resources” between male and female teams is significant and persistent (Theberge, 2000; Pelak, 2002). The gender inequality and “issues of power” in ice hockey are “connected to governance structures” and existing societal gender patterns which derails positive growth (Adams, 2018). One study on the
social construction of girls’ sports found “the importance of agency in the implementation of sport programs” (Cooky, 2009). Agency not only refers to the group of people who support programs, but how they implement leadership to create a positive experience. Creating the opportunities, but also encouraging participation is needed. The IIHF hosts Girls Hockey Weekend in the fall of every year to provide access to girls of all ages who may have never been exposed to or played hockey, which is a positive initiative from a large governing body. But “a consistent and reliable schedule of practices and games [is] crucial to participation” and one weekend a year coupled with the unequal distribution of ice time is not enough to grow female youth ice hockey (Cooky, 2009).

USA Hockey’s ultimate goal is to have a winning national team, and it has acknowledged the importance of developing youth players’ skills, techniques, and attitudes (Rand, 2018). High performance programs for the more developed, elite athlete are being formed all over North America. These programs focus on those who already have the skills and the means to play and in the end, overlook grassroots programs (Adams, 2018). USA Hockey recognized the problem of coaches’ “heavy focus on the scoreboard” and “specific game tactics” and launched the American Development Model (ADM) in 2009 (American Development Model). The mission of the ADM is to use age-specific and age-appropriate training to keep “kids excited about coming to the rink, while also developing them and guiding them on a path to achieve their full potential” (American Development Model). The program aims to use drills and small sided to games to “engage” kids on the ice to ensure they have fun and return to the game to increase retention (Sapurji, 2017).
The ADM has proven to be an important youth program by being adopted by other organizations like the NHL and the Olympic Committee. Fraser-Thomas, et al., who studied the significance of youth sport programs, concluded that when implementing youth sport programs, athletes will “have positive sport experiences, and emerge competent, confident, connected, compassionate, character-rich members of society” when programs prioritize an appropriate setting and promote developmental assets (2005). The study also found that positive “adult influence” can have a lasting effect on youth athletes and a “reciprocal relationship with others” creates effective development (Fraser-Thomas, 2005).

Any extracurricular activities, including sports, can be vital outlets for athletes of all ages. “For girls, sport participation was significantly related to peer acceptance” and “global self-esteem,” which in turn creates a community and support system (Daniels, 2006). Female hockey players are known to stick together to build “a strong community of women from diverse backgrounds and social locations,” and in the end challenge themselves athletically and socially (Pelak, 2002). The history of USA Hockey, how female athletes are perceived, and the creation of successful youth programs all contribute to the growth of sports, and youth female ice hockey, in particular.

**Methodology**

This study uses a flexible design with semi-structured interviews to permit “more freedom during data collection” (Velu, 2015). The interviews were structured to include certain questions, but allowed for the conversation to develop based on the interviewee’s experiences. The study is concentrated on first-hand accounts of female youth ice hockey
and professional women’s ice hockey in the United States. The research consists of five interviews with hockey players, coaches, and administrators. The purpose of the interviews was to assess 1) the motives behind encouraging female athletics, 2) how women’s ice hockey is marketed and growing, and 3) the future aspirations for the sport. Again, it is important to note “with qualitative methods, research objectives are data-driven,” which means the information collected lends itself entirely to the subjects being interviewed (Cooky, 2009). Therefore, the interviews and questions varied slightly between contributors depending on the background of the interviewee and how the interviewee responded.

The questions asked were developed by creating categories similar to the purposes stated above. The three categories of questions included 1) motivation to play youth ice hockey, 2) marketing women’s ice hockey, and 3) how to grow the game in the future. When interviewing players, the questions focused on their careers and what they hope the sport will look like in the future, while the interviews with youth hockey administrators, focused more on their expertise of youth programs.

The first interview conducted was with Amanda Pelkey, 2018 Olympic gold medalist and Vermont native. Amanda has been in the USA Hockey pool since 2009, played at the University of Vermont where she is the program’s all time leader in points, assists, and goals, and currently plays for the Boston Pride in the NWHL.

The second interviewee was Brianna Decker, 2018 Olympic gold medalist and 2014 Olympic silver medalist and Team USA’s alternate captain. Brianna played at Shattuck St. Mary’s in high school, and then went on to play at the University of Wisconsin where she won the Patty Kazmaier Award, which is given to the top NCAA
Division I female ice hockey player. She currently plays in the Canadian Women’s Hockey League (CWHL), but is also an assistant coach for USA Hockey’s Under 18 team.

The third interview was conducted with Keith Andresen who is currently the General Manager of the Dallas Stars’ practice facility in Frisco, Texas and President of the Texas Amateur Hockey Association’s High School Section. Keith has been involved in youth hockey as a player, coach, referee, and administrator for over 55 years.

The fourth interviewee was Nat Harden, Senior Vice President of Ticket Sales, Premium Sales, and Youth Hockey for the Nashville Predators. Nat has worked with the Predators since 1997, before the team’s 1998 inaugural season and has helped grow the fan base from scratch in a non-traditional market.

The last interview was with Lyndsey Fry, who was the first Arizona native to compete for Team USA at the Olympic Games. She is a 2014 Olympic silver medalist, played Division I hockey at Harvard, and currently, is the head coach of the Arizona Coyotes girls hockey development program, Small Frys.

The five interviewees chosen were diverse and could give different insights to the game because of their different backgrounds and positions within youth ice hockey in the United States. The interviews with Amanda Pelkey and Brianna Decker were the most comprehensive as they are currently Team USA players and actively marketing the game with USA Hockey, but the questions were kept as consistent as possible throughout all meetings. The list of questions used can be found in Appendix 1.

The interviews were conducted over the phone or in person with the exception of Lyndsey Fry who sent her answers via email. After getting the contributors permission,
the rest of the interviews were recorded using Simple Recorder on the laptop or Voice Memos on the phone and then transcribed. After the discussions were transcribed, they were printed out in order to annotate and highlight key words and consistent messages.

This lead into finding patterns between the five interviews and creating concept maps to compare and contrast the key words. “Concept mapping is a technique for facilitating validation of one’s critical thinking by graphically depicting” the words and phrases relevant to the concentrated concepts (Harris, 2017). These words, phrases, or concepts and their synonyms brought up by each of the interviewees make up their beliefs about growing the game of ice hockey. This led to easier identification of important components these hockey players and youth hockey coaches and administrators believe are needed to grow the game of ice hockey. According to Miller, concept mapping is best utilized when “specifically related to planning initiatives,” such as an initiative to increase youth participation in athletics (2016).

This research paper partially relies on qualitative research of existing literature, particularly in the areas of history of female sports, media coverage of female sports, the motivation behind participation in sport, and youth sports. The bulk of this analysis will rely on comparing the similarities and differences between the youth participation, marketing, and motivation of women’s soccer and women’s ice hockey and their athletes.

The information gained from the interviews coupled with the qualitative research of existing literature will form the results, discussion, and conclusion about the components needed to grow the game of ice hockey.
Results

After identifying key works and consistent messages, tables were created to sort the concepts and phrases in order of the number of times they were mentioned by each interviewee. See Appendix 2 for the Tables. Once the tables were made and the phrases were sorted by repetition, the concept maps could be formed. See Appendix 3 for the Concept Maps. The more times a phrase was mentioned by each interviewee, the larger the phrase is shown in the concept map to emphasize the position compared to the other phrases. Some concepts can be related to any of the four categories of the concept map depending on context, meaning there are overlapping phrases between categories. The concept maps are color coordinated based on overlapping phrases, and these overlapping concepts are the same color to illustrate this relationship.

In developing the concept maps, the key components to growing the game of ice hockey and the main barriers restricting the growth of ice hockey were identified. Additionally, the intangible benefits of participating in youth sports were identified throughout the study and were recorded. The results identified eleven components of growing the game of ice hockey, eight barriers, six intangible benefits, and six additional concepts relating to the growth of youth female ice hockey labeled as “additional phrases”. These results incorporate the most used concepts, phrases, and words from the interviews conducted.

The eleven key growth components to growing the game of youth female ice hockey include 1) involvement in the community or youth camps, 2) the NHL, 3) facilities, ice, or infrastructure, 4) television broadcast, 5) success and loving winners, 6) awareness or exposure, 7) resources including people and money, 8) USA Hockey,
9) friends, 10) social media, and 11) family. Table 1 and Concept Map 1 summarize the growth components of youth female ice hockey. The components are ranked based on the number of times each concept was mentioned by an interviewee. For example, “involvement in the community or youth camps” was mentioned by all five interviewees, while “family” was only mentioned by two interviewees, Brianna Decker and Amanda Pelkey. Involvement in the community or youth camps was the strongest growth component and refers to implementing youth hockey into the community as an outlet for players and including professional women’s and men’s players and a local or regional NHL team. Using the brand and resources of an NHL team was mentioned the second most, as it was highly regarded as a key component for four of the five interviewees and mentioned more as a bonus than a necessity by Nat Harden. Facilities, ice, or infrastructure, broadcasting women’s games and interviews with female players on TV, success and loving winners, awareness and exposure, human and financial resources, and USA Hockey were all mentioned by three interviewees. Concepts like “awareness” and “exposure” can be synonymous with other phrases like “broadcasting women’s games and interviews with female players on TV”, but including specific words the interviewees used is needed to fully complete the concept map, and therefore, the results.

Table 2 and Concept Map 2 display the eight barriers inhibiting the growth of youth female ice hockey mentioned the most by the five interviewees including 1) finances or expenses, 2) gender bias, 3) lack of awareness, 4) lack of knowledge, 5) travel, 6) lack of access, 7) perception of the sport, and 8) skating. The financial obligation of the sport was the number one barrier inhibiting the growth mentioned by four of the interviewees. Awareness, or lack there of, can be used as both a necessity to
grow and an inhibitor. Perception of the sport was mentioned only by Keith Andresen, but encompasses many barriers including the financial obligation, gender bias, and roughness of the sport. Andresen also was the only interviewee who mentioned skating as being a barrier.

The six significant intangible benefits of participating in youth sports acknowledged were 1) community, 2) inspiring the next generation, 3) give back, 4) better person off the ice, 5) confidence, and 6) outlet. These intangible benefits are summarized in Table 3 and Concept Map 3. Community was mentioned and emphasized by all five interviewees. In this context, community refers to creating a support system and people to share the sport with. Being a better person off the ice suggests character traits such as honesty, kindness, responsibility, and respect.

The last section of the concept map includes concepts and phrases frequently used throughout the interviews that do not easily fit into one of the three segments mentioned above. These concepts relate to the growth of ice hockey but could not necessarily stand on their own as a component of growth, a barrier, or an intangible benefit. These six phrases are displayed in Table 4 and Concept Map 4 and include 1) continuous, constant, or consistent, 2) played with boys growing up, 3) non-traditional market, 4) the Olympics, 5) grassroots, and 6) not a lack of interest. Continuous, constant, and being consistent were used by the interviewees when describing how to move forward and carry momentum from significant events, like the Winter Olympics and World Championships. Most of the interviewees said growing ice hockey in non-traditional markets could have a larger impact on the sport as a whole. A non-traditional market indicates states such as Texas, Arizona, Tennessee, and Florida. Grassroots programs are
clinics and leagues that introduce the most basic skills of ice hockey at a young age to develop athletes, and these programs can be associated with getting involved in the community and youth camps. Nat Harden was the only interviewee who mentioned there not being a lack of interest, referring to the interest in playing and watching hockey in Nashville, Tennessee.

While there were other topics of discussion throughout the interviews, the results are compromised of the concepts most related to the three components of this research study, growth components, barriers, and intangible benefits. The results are discussed further below.

**Discussion**

After the review of literature, interviews, and concept mapping, the results lead to meaningful finds in regards to the growth components, the barriers, and the intangible benefits of youth female ice hockey. The intangible benefits of participating in youth ice hockey were originally not an anticipated outcome of this research, but the interviews suggested the importance of these components and how they affect the growth of the sport. Because the interviewees consistently mentioned these intangible benefits, a category was included when creating the concept maps. While there are definite similarities between the beliefs of the interviewees, there are also some contrasting ideas. The different backgrounds of each of the subjects are why they were chosen and why the results can be regarded as well rounded and thorough.

Originally, the study was going to compare professional women’s ice hockey to professional women’s soccer. During the review of literature, interviews, and concept
mapping, the comparisons to soccer did not prove to be as influential as expected. While the interviewees, especially the current players, look up to and admire female soccer athletes, the differences between the two sports starting at the youth level made it difficult to relate. This further proves ice hockey, and especially female ice hockey is a unique sport with distinctive characteristics and needs.

**Growth Components**

Identifying the components needed to grow the game of youth female ice hockey was the primary goal of this research study. The concentration was on Team USA following the 2018 Winter Olympics and how the team and USA Hockey could build on the success of winning a gold medal. Interestingly, the Olympic games were not mentioned as a necessary growth component to ice hockey. Pelkey, Team USA gold-medalist, stated, “people who watch sports love winners,” and while she emphasized the importance of being “consistent” after the Olympics to grow the sport, it comes down to a lot more than just two months of hockey every four years (2018). Andresen, a Dallas Stars’ youth hockey administrator, agreed “people like winners” and there is an increase in interest with success, but it applies to all Olympic sports (2019). Andresen highlighted the Dallas Stars are “constantly working at the grassroots levels” twelve months out of the year, so there is nothing special surrounding the Olympics (2019). Fry, 2014 Olympian and youth hockey administrator for the Arizona Coyotes, recognizes winning gold “has only helped to accelerate” the growth of youth hockey, but overall, the steady growth of her program has been from investing resources and time for the past five years (2019). Success and “the public celebration of girls’ and women’s sport does not always
translate into increased participation”, which further emphasizes that the success at one event, even if it is the Olympics, does not constitute growth (Adams, 2018).

Growing the game requires resources, in terms of human capital and financial support. All five interviewees agreed the backing of an NHL team, especially in a non-traditional market, is important or at least, helpful, as you can see from the size of “The NHL” in Concept Map 1. Decker, 2018 gold-medalist, said an NHL team could be “a sort of stepping stone” to branch off of because of the support it already has in its city from fans (2018). Andresen believed as long as “the NHL team is committed to growing the game and they commit the resources to grow the game, it’s absolutely an advantage” (2019). Relating back to Cooky’s study on the social construction of girls’ sports, expanding structures of opportunities and allocating resources is not enough (2009). An “agency”, such as the NHL or an NHL team, is needed to commit to implementing and growing the game, and not just to donate funds (Cooky, 2009). An agent is necessary to provide leadership, establish support, and increase participation. The human capital and the stated commitment to grow the game are needed just as much as the financial resources are needed. Andresen went on to explain the importance of having the local NHL players, like Jamie Benn and Tyler Seguin, coming to youth programs to promote the game and get young kids excited. On the other hand, while Harden recognized having a local NHL team does not hurt, he believes you do not need an NHL team as long as you have “the ice” (2019).

Harden’s theory is more so related to the fact that the NHL team has a responsibility to help the community, and increasing participation in the youth hockey programs in the end helps promote the Predators and create lifelong fans. Similarly,
Harden believes the more teams that operate their own facilities and get involved in the community, then “help grow the game, and promote the league” (2019). This research suggests the NHL, a governing structure, has a responsibility to the community to facilitate youth programs. Decker, while she appreciates and acknowledges the resources governing bodies like the NHL and USA Hockey can provide, ultimately believes “for the most part it falls on actual players” and it is the job of the players to grow the game (2018). Decker wants Team USA players to continuously be involved in youth camps and local communities to grow the game, and emphasized again that the involvement cannot be only in the few months after the Olympics. Players and USA Hockey can capitalize on the World Championships, Four Nations Cup, or even national team camps. Literature indicates the “implementation of sport programs” is just as important, if not more important than just allocating resources (Cooky, 2018). Having Team USA players involved in youth programs and camps surrounding NHL or USA Hockey events, is a way to combine the resources and the operations to put role models for young female athletes on the ice with them. “Adult influence” has a large impact on the success of youth programs, so having experienced and committed role models is necessary to grow youth female ice hockey (Fraser-Thomas, 2005).

Harden, undoubtedly, was most adamant about having the facilities with sheets of ice. Like Theberge stated, the “most critical resource in hockey is ice time,” and this ice time has to be provided to grow all youth hockey, and then equally distributed between male and female players (2000). The only way to grow the game of ice hockey is to have the facilities to play, and the Predators are committed to building new rinks in Nashville. In the end, building these new rinks takes a large financial investment and through a
public-private partnership between the Predators and the Metro Government of Nashville these rinks are able to become a reality for the community. “Girls will naturally want to participate in [hockey] if the ice is there,” but if the only way ice can be provided is because of the assistance of an NHL team then it is necessary to have an NHL team (Harden, 2019). The Predators and the Stars like to think of themselves as more regional teams, and both have traveling grassroots programs that span upwards of five states providing free lessons to youth players. Reaching as many communities as possible is necessary and just another part of the NHL’s “Hockey Is For Everyone” initiative.

Based upon the evidence, having not only the financial support but also the marketing support and promotion from the NHL can lead to more exposure and the growth of female ice hockey. Pelkey was appreciative of what the NHL has done, including inviting Team USA players to Bruins games at TD Garden for in between period interviews and hosting the NWHL All Star game at Bridgestone Arena, home of the Nashville Predators. These “endorsements and marketing opportunities…can lead to broader improvements and better conditions for the next generation” of female ice hockey players (Coombs, 2014). The goal is to continuously build upon the opportunities and create a lasting partnership with the NHL and individual NHL teams.

Decker and Pelkey, both have dedicated yet humble personalities, but their competitiveness shines through when they talk about loving the challenge of growing youth female ice hockey in non-traditional markets. “Anywhere we go, it would be worth it,” Decker said, and Pelkey backed it up by adding, “it would be hard but it would also be rewarding because I think a lot of people would enjoy it” (2018). In Nashville, the problem “is not a lack of interest” and there has been steady growth with female ice
hockey, as long as they have the ice (Harden, 2019). The evidence indicates the strong belief that if people had the access and the exposure, they would enjoy ice hockey as much, if not more, than any other sport.

Overall, the growth components of female youth ice hockey, involve the access, awareness, and exposure of the sport in communities. The concept map suggests the most important, overarching component to increasing youth participation is the involvement in the community. Starting players at the grassroots level early, sets them up to continue to play with their peers. Every national and international governing body, and current and former professional player can be resources to young players and parents who are not exposed to the sport enough. While the professional success of winning a gold medal is influential and motivating, it is necessary to be in the rinks and on the ice with young players, especially in non-traditional markets, to grow the game of ice hockey.

**Barriers**

The barriers inhibiting the growth of ice hockey need to be addressed in order to formulate a plan to lessen them as much as possible. According to this research, a handful of the barriers discovered are related to the growth components of the game, as you can see from the color coordination between categories. For example, the lack of awareness of women’s professional hockey and the lack of knowledge about the sport and how to participate in it are two of the identified barriers restricting the growth of ice hockey. The interviewees mentioned these components in both contexts in reference to growth components - needing increased awareness and knowledge - and in reference to barriers -
the lack of awareness and knowledge is restricting the game. In the concept maps, these components are all purple.

The leading barrier found in this study is the financial obligation of the sport of ice hockey. Players need to be equipped head to toe in gear that is not cheap, and therefore, “financially, soccer [or other sports] is easier” (Pelkey, 2018). It is the gear, and also the ice time, the travel, and the league dues that add up to make ice hockey an expensive sport. Decker, as well as the rest of the interviewees, was always quick to not drag on the barriers. “Finances do stop families from having their kids join hockey,” but solutions are being brainstormed to make the sport more affordable (Decker, 2018). Decker suggested, “[Team USA players] could sponsor a kid or a team” to allow young players the chance to get out on the ice (2018). USA Hockey promotes Try Hockey For Free events and programs to help create a less expensive entry into the sport. Harden and Andresen both mentioned these programs and how they use their NHL team brand to commit to growing these “rookies” programs for free (2019). Fry, indirectly, identified finances as being a main barrier inhibiting growth in Arizona by saying the Coyotes “subsidize a lot of [their] programs to make entry into the sport as easy possible” (2019). This research suggests governing bodies are putting forth valid efforts to make the entry to the sport as inexpensive as possible. What the research identifies as being a barrier is the continuous cost of the sport. The initial gear and exposure to learning how to play has been subsidized, but the constant need for new gear, travel, and league dues has not been addressed. The goal of governing bodies and influential agencies, like players, should be to combat the notion that “youth sport programs are becoming increasingly expensive, competitive, and elitist” (Fraser-Thomas, 2005).
The study suggests the second leading barrier inhibiting the growth of female youth ice hockey is “persisting gender ideologies,” which supports claims by previous research from Adams (2018) “People think only males can play hockey,” Decker said (2018). Actually, “male hockey players respect [the women’s] game so much,” and “people just do not know women’s hockey enough” (Decker, 2018). While the existing gender bias for all women’s sports, and especially ice hockey, cannot solely be blamed on lack of knowledge, it definitely plays a huge part. Parents are shocked when they realize girls can play ice hockey, but it is due to a “lack of awareness” of the opportunities to participate in states like Arizona and where the sport can take female athletes in the future (Fry, 2019). Participation in ice hockey involves “social choices [that] often mirror and reproduce existing gender patterns” (Adams, 2018). Common assumptions due to lack of knowledge and awareness lead to fathers and young males being more involved which causes the drop-out rate for youth female athletics to be six times that of boys when they reach adolescence (Cooky, 2009). This suggests, like the financial barrier, the problem with youth sports and ice hockey is the retention of athletes and continuously providing access for young females.

Decker and Pelkey credit their families, and specifically their brothers, for increasing their interest in the game. Many people can relate to wanting to be just like their older sibling. Not every female ice hockey player will have the support of their family, so creating programs backed by USA Hockey and the NHL in local communities is essential. The Hockey Is For Everyone initiative encompasses much more than just gender, but the constant need to push this message, more than just in the month of February, is needed to make the campaign second nature.
Another takeaway from the study is the mentioning of playing with boys growing up by all the interviewees, but Harden. All three female players interviewed played on a boys team until they reached high school, but not one implied this fact was a barrier to growing female ice hockey. It was so matter-of-fact for them, and what they had to do to have access and be the best player they could be. Andresen went on to add that it’s “the right choice” to play with boys if you have the talent because it will increase your speed of play, your skill level, and physicality (2019). If “for girls, sport participation [is] significantly related to peer acceptance” and because of existing gender ideologies of the masculinity of the sport of ice hockey, it seems counterintuitive to not see the accepted practice of playing with boys as a barrier (Daniels, 2006). Young females could start playing ice hockey and then be discouraged to continue if they think they have to play on the boys’ team to be successful. This problem is an effect of there not being enough girls’ teams and access for females, but it is also a cause of there not being enough girls’ teams and access for females. Accepting this continues the message that it is enough to allow the access and opportunity for girls to play with boys instead of asking the question “access to what?” (Adams, 2018). How the structure of youth programs and teams is implemented should be different based on gender because of patterns and assumptions that have persisted for decades in the sport of ice hockey. The ADM, a successful and well-thought out youth program that has been adopted by many governing bodies and sports, emphasizes age-specific skill development to make hockey more enjoyable. The ADM does not have different frameworks between genders, even though males and females develop at different ages. Because girls are six times more likely to dropout of
sports by the time they reach adolescence, different structures should be further researched and implemented into the ADM (Cooky, 2009).

The research shows Andresen is the only interviewee who suggested skating as a potential barrier inhibiting the growth of ice hockey. This is a very unique attribute to the sport of ice hockey and a barrier that needs to be included in the concept map even if only one expert mentioned it. If kids do not learn how to skate properly, “it is a hard sport to jump into when you are older,” which can discourage entry (Andresen, 2019). The average age elite level athletes first participated in entry-level competition for their particular team sport was 7.99 years old (Gulbin, 2010), but Pelkey and Fry stated they each started hockey at ages three and four, respectively. This barrier is impossible to change as it is a fundamental skill of the sport, but encouraging early grassroots participation is the best way to combat it.

The study suggested an overall theme for the barriers to ice hockey – “the perception” of the sport (Andresen, 2019). The perception the cost is prohibitive, the perception only males play ice hockey, and the perception the sport is too rough can all be attributed to the lack of awareness and knowledge. Growing the game of female youth ice hockey will not change over night and exposure comes with time, success, and the resources, but changing the perception of the sport is a good place to start.

**Intangible Benefits**

As previously mentioned, the intangible benefits of playing ice hockey were unexpected findings in this study. Because the interviews had a “flexible design,” the intangible benefits of participation naturally came up in conversation and proved to be
important components to promote the growth of ice hockey (Velu, 2015). This category is where the motivation from and admiration of other professional female athletes, like professional soccer players, came up the most, which was one of the only relations between ice hockey and soccer.

The term community was mentioned as a growth component because being involved in the community and providing a support system is needed to grow the game. Community is suggested as an intangible benefit in this context because playing ice hockey also creates a community and a support system. Being around the rink and a part of a team makes hockey a “really big community sport” that helps participants with all aspects of life (Pelkey, 2018). Decker, who attended boarding school in Minnesota to play hockey, believes going away from home in high school developed her athletically, socially, and personally. “Community has such a big impact on athletes,” and creating the support system is essential for development (Decker, 2018). Together, “women’s shared identity as hockey players and their commitment to the sport [are] important for building a strong community” of support (Pelak, 2002). Each of the players interviewed had a sense of pride and appreciation for the people they each were lucky enough to be surrounded by during their respective career. In the end, “a group is more powerful than one,” and female athletes recognize and appreciate this (Decker, 2018).

The study revealed the different perspectives between interviewees and their experiences. Pelkey and Decker, both current players, unfailingly brought up off-ice characteristics and personal growth. The nature of their interviews led them to be more conversational, but the two interviewees most actively involved in the
sport, Pelkey and Decker, showed an appreciation for hockey that went well beyond the athletic achievements. Being humble, loyal, and kind are a few of the characteristics each of them mentioned when describing what it is like to be involved in hockey and be a good teammate. Youth athletics develop “competent, confident, connected, compassionate, character-rich members of society,” and the concepts gathered from the interviews supports this (Fraser-Thomas, 2005).

One of Decker’s consistent premises throughout her interview is the confidence she gained from being a strong athlete and how it can “impact the younger generation” (2018). Sports foster “global self-esteem” and confidence for young females (Daniels, 2006). Being a professional female athlete comes with a sort of cultural icon reputation that is important to positively inspire the next generation. The study suggests the importance of strong female role models and how exposure to women’s ice hockey can give young “girls who play some vision and focus” on what they can accomplish on and off the ice (Harden, 2019). Team USA players are building themselves outside their sport to “inspire the next generation” to be successful athletes but also better people (Pelkey, 2018).

Overall, the research proves the importance of youth athletics and how participating in youth female ice hockey builds communities of strong and confident players. This data shows not how to grow female ice hockey but why female ice hockey should grow and gives a well-rounded summary of the importance of growing the game.
Conclusion And Recommendations For Future Study

The purpose of this study was to 1) identify the components needed to grow the game of ice hockey, and 2) identify the main barriers inhibiting the growth of ice hockey. Recognizing the intangible benefits of participating in youth sports was an important addition to the study and added vital information. While the interviewees emphasized different components, the study unanimously suggested the importance of intentional and committed involvement in youth hockey programs by resourceful governing bodies and players. Financial obligations deter families from joining many sports, but especially ice hockey. Overall the need to improve the awareness and knowledge of the sport can lead to a better understanding of how and why it is essential to grow the game.

USA Hockey and NHL teams have worked to create more opportunities for young girls to participate, but how the programs are run and who runs them is even more important. Further research is needed to identify how young female hockey players develop and respond differently than young male hockey players on and off the ice. This further research can develop a study on retaining female athletes to continue to play ice hockey.

This research focused on introducing the sport to young athletes in non-traditional markets. Further studies need to be conducted to detect how to strengthen female ice hockey in seemingly ‘traditional’ markets. Decker and Pelkey, Wisconsin and Vermont natives respectively, still grew up playing with boys, traveling hours to practices, and eventually played at hockey specific schools away from home. While they both loved
their experiences, more research is needed to find the positive and negative effects of elite prep and boarding schools on the growth of the game.

Lastly, television broadcasts of women’s ice hockey games and media interviews with professional female athletes were mentioned but not fully discussed in this paper. Future studies should research the effects national coverage and exposure of professional women’s ice hockey can have on younger generations. As of March of 2019, the CWHL, where Brianna Decker plays when she is not playing with Team USA, announced its discontinuation of operations. This entices further investigation into professional women’s ice hockey, how the NHL can support women’s ice hockey, and how marketing and broadcasting of women’s ice hockey can impact future generations.

In conclusion, research studies on female youth and professional ice hockey are still needed as sports and society are constantly changing. The components needed to grow female youth ice hockey and the barriers restricting the growth of female youth ice hockey were identified and can be used to expose and enhance hockey in non-traditional markets. In the end, the goal is to grow the game.
Appendix

Appendix 1. Interview Questions

1. Who or what motivated you growing up, in anything?
2. Who got you into playing hockey?
3. What age were you when you realized you had this special talent at playing hockey?
4. What age did you fully commit to hockey as your one sport?
5. How important do you think the media is for women’s sports?
6. How important are sponsorship deals for women’s sports?
7. Do you think the success or failure of the men’s national team has an effect on the women’s team awareness?
8. How do you think Team USA’s success at the Olympics will effect youth participation?
9. What do you think USA Hockey, on the youth side, can learn from USA Soccer?
10. What are the main roadblocks to growing hockey?
11. Do you think that the focus should be the introduction of the sport in new places, in non-traditional markets, or do you think it should be on enhancing the sport where it’s already exposed?
12. Is an NHL team needed in the non-traditional markets to grow the game?
13. Who do you look up to today and what has been motivating you recently?
14. Do you see a constant growth every year in girls’ participation?
15. Was there a significant change in girls’ participation after the Olympics?
16. Did you use the Olympics/Team USA/individual players to market girls hockey (ex: have any events or special promotions)?
17. Do you market hockey differently in a non-traditional market?
18. What does hosting the NWHL All Star weekend mean for the city of Nashville and women’s ice hockey?
## Appendix 2. Tables

### Table 1. Growth Components

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Brianna Decker</th>
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<th>Keith Andresen</th>
<th>Nat Harden</th>
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The number of checkmarks indicates the level of involvement or importance for each individual.
### Table 2. Barriers

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### Table 3. Intangible Benefits

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### Table 4. Additional Phrases

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**Key 1. Interviewee Descriptions**

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<tr>
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Appendix 3. Concept Maps

1. Growth Components

2. Barriers

3. Intangible Benefits

4. Additional Phrases
1. Growth Components

- Social Media
- Resources
- Success
- The NHL
- Exposure
- Friends
- Family
- Community
- Facilities or Ice
- TV Broadcast
- Awareness
- USA Hockey

2. Barriers

- Skating
- Access
- Knowledge
- Gender Bias
- Finances
- Awareness
- Travel
- Perception
3. Intangible Benefits

Confidence
Inspire
Community
Give Back
Better Person
Outlet

4. Additional Phrases

Olympics
Non-Traditional Market
Constant
Not A Lack Of Interest
Continuous
Consistent
Played With Boys
Grassroots
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<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>All Other Phrases</td>
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*Colors are used to relate and compare phrases between concept maps*
References


Velu, R. (2015). Designing a Qualitative and Flexible Case Study to Investigate the Opportunities and Challenges for Primary Education Offered to First-Generation Learners in a Rural Community in the State of Maharashtra, India. *Support for Learning, 30*(3), 223-238. https://doi-org.pallas2.tel.sc.edu/10.1111/1467-9604.12092


“Women’s Ice Hockey.” *NCAA*, https://www.ncaa.com/sports/icehockey-women/nc