

**Manitoba Midget Triple A Hockey Coaches' Environment:  
Coaches' Perspectives**

**By Lainie A. Wintrup**

**A Thesis**

**Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
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**Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation Studies  
University of Manitoba  
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**THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA**  
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**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University of  
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Now, to you: The idea for this research came as a result of experiencing behavioural misconduct by persons in a position of power. Part of the problem in situations of abuse and harassment is that the victims do not know where to turn. If you are a student at U of M and are in need of assistance, please contact the Student Advocacy / Student Resource Services.

**DON'T LET YOUR FEARS STAND IN THE WAY OF YOUR DREAMS!**

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative interpretive analysis with Manitoba Midget Triple A Hockey Coaches was to gain their perspectives regarding Midget Triple A team dynamics. Seven former or current Midget Triple A hockey coaches who met the research criteria volunteered for the one-with-one interview whereby topics regarding communication with players, opposition coaches, officials, organization, and league representatives and codes of conduct were explored. Sub-categories to emerge from these interviews include conveying a positive and negative message via verbal and non-verbal indicators, unwritten rules of team dynamics, player leadership, dressing room dynamics, and instances of disempowerment. The information garnered from this dialogue was then discussed within a framework of current abuse, harassment and masculine culture literature whereby a symbiotic relationship of the sport environment and Masculinization is discussed.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Chapter One</b> .....	1
<b>Chapter Two</b>	
<b>Review of Literature</b>	
<b>Part I: NHL's Impact on Canadian Amateur Hockey</b> .....	8
Introduction.....	8
NHL in the Beginning.....	9
1917-1939: The Birth of the NHL to Pre-WWII.....	9
1940s-1979: Further Unionization Attempts to Entry Draft.....	11
The Impact of the 1980 Draft Changes and Today.....	15
Over-All Summary.....	16
<b>Part II: Abuse, Harassment, and Masculine Culture</b> .....	19
Introduction.....	19
Controversy in Definitions.....	21
Abuse – What is it?.....	22
Emotional Abuse.....	22
Physical Abuse.....	25
Sexual Abuse.....	25
Reason for Utilizing These Definitions..	27
Perpetrators: The Debate Over Naming Them.....	28
Paedophile or Predators? The Sport Differentiation.....	30
Power and Coaches.....	34
Athletes and Abuse.....	35
Impact of Abuse.....	37
Harassment.....	39
Research in Harassment and Sport.....	43
Male Culture and Sport.....	48
Canadian Hockey League's Kirke Report.....	53
Manitoba Midget AAA.....	56
Over-All Summary.....	57
<b>Chapter Three</b>	
<b>Method</b>	
Introduction.....	59
Research Paradigm.....	59
Three Paradigms of Social Science.....	60
Positivist.....	62
Critical.....	62
Interpretive.....	63
Selecting a Paradigm.....	63
Qualitative Method.....	64

Method Employed (Semi-Standardized Interview).....	65
Deriving Information.....	66
Participants in the Study.....	68
Sampling Criteria.....	68
Utilizing the Interview Guide.....	71
Data Management.....	73
Labeling.....	73
Logging Data.....	74
Analysis.....	74
Outline for Generating Findings.....	76
Addressing Trustworthiness and Credibility.....	77
Triangulation.....	77
Field Notes.....	78
Questions Generated During the Conceptual Phase.....	80
Preconceptions.....	81
Ethical Guidelines.....	82
Over-All-Summary.....	83

## **Chapter Four**

### **Descriptive Analysis**

Introduction.....	84
Administration of Program.....	86
Volunteer-Run vs. Parent-Run Board of Directors.....	86
Hiring Practices.....	88
Rural.....	88
City.....	89
Review of Performance.....	91
Summary.....	92
Code of Conduct.....	94
Coaches.....	95
Rural.....	95
City.....	97
Players.....	99
Written Code of Conduct: Team.....	99
Unwritten Rules: Team.....	102
On-Ice Individual Emotional Expectations.....	102
Teammate Support.....	103
Unwritten Rules: Between Players: Leadership.....	104
Summary.....	106
Competitive Environment: Living By a Code of Conduct.....	107
Dressing Room Environment.....	108
Consequences.....	111
Summary.....	116
Communication: From Coaches to Players.....	117
Non-Verbal Communication.....	119

Positive Non-Verbal Communication.....	120
Negative Non-Verbal Communication.....	120
Verbal—Non Verbal Communication: To Players: Games.....	122
Communication: To Players: Verbal: Winning.....	124
Summary.....	125
Disempowerment.....	126
Over-all Summary.....	127

## **Chapter Five**

<b>Discussion and Conclusion.....</b>	<b>130</b>
Introduction.....	130
Discussion.....	130
Sport Environment and Masculinization: A Symbiotic Relationship.....	131
Limitations.....	136
Main Drawbacks.....	137
Method.....	137
Data.....	137
Time.....	138
Summary.....	139
Recommendations.....	140
Recommendation One.....	141
Recommendation Two.....	141
Recommendation Three.....	142
Summary.....	143
Over-All Summary.....	144

<b>References.....</b>	<b>145</b>
------------------------	------------

## **Appendix A**

Newspaper Advertisement.....	152
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## **Appendix B**

Consent Form.....	153
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## **Appendix C**

Pre-Interview Questionnaire.....	154
----------------------------------	-----

## **Appendix D**

Interview Guide for Coaches.....	155
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## **Appendix E**

Examples of Interview Probes.....	156
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# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The crisp evening air brings a tingle of excitement as it burns with each breath. Underfoot one can hear the crunch of the ice with each bite of the skate. The evening is charged with excitement of the impending game—Lord Stanley's Cup is on the line. There are no penalties in this game. All the players have the opportunity to skate, pass, shoot—SCORE! Each goal is met with the cheers of thousands. Goals are exchanged—back and forth—the score teeters on the brink of a tie until a player exclaims, “Next goal wins, I've got to get home for supper!” The team that wins gets momentary bragging rights until the next match-up: after supper.

As the last fading rays of the winter sun stretch across the prairie sky many Canadian hockey players of all ages and sizes will spend hours playing on frozen ponds or outdoor rinks dreaming of winning the coveted cup. The real Stanley Cup, as it is referred to, goes to the victor of the National Hockey League (NHL), home of the premier professional hockey players. Winners have their names proudly engraved onto it after their team is victorious in the Stanley Cup Finals. Unfortunately, many consider the game at the professional level to have morphed into a violent and ethically suspect game. Media coverage of hockey in the last decade has revealed that the hockey environment in North America is a problematic one. Recent issues of ‘excessive’ player violence—Todd Bertuzzi (2004), Marc Messier (2003), the McSorley court case (2002), recent team brawls between Ottawa Senators and the Philadelphia Flyers (March 2004), NHL and other players speaking out regarding sexual abuse and harassment of underage players by hockey coaches and other hockey participants (Kennedy, 1997; L. Robinson, 2000), and



the incidents of hazing and other acts involving criminal charges have been covered in print and television media. As thousands of amateur players strive towards their goal of participating at the NHL level, something must be occurring to make the stream poisonous to the participants.

Midget Triple A represents the elite level of Minor Hockey, a level where young male players are poised to advance to the semi-professional environment of Junior Hockey, and then quite possibly, into a professional league. For those players who have invested a substantial amount of time and training towards their dream, they may not be inclined to complain about ill treatment by a powerful coach or administrator. By the time a player has developed into an Elite Midget Triple A hockey player, his parents have invested a significant amount of money in assisting this dream.

The intention of this project is to gain an understanding of the Midget Triple A environment utilizing a qualitative interpretive analysis with Manitoba Midget Triple A Hockey Coaches on their perspectives regarding Midget Triple A team dynamics with an emphasis on communication and codes of conduct as these topics relate to abuse, harassment and masculine culture.

Chapter two, the literature review, will consist of two parts. Part one will provide a synopsis of the NHL's evolution from the roots of the organization's early years of development as it impacts the game's sporting culture. It is not a history of the NHL<sup>1</sup>. This chapter is to provide background information for those individuals not familiar with

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<sup>1</sup>To provide this backdrop, the NHL-recognized, "The Official Encyclopaedia of the National Hockey League, Total Hockey," edited by Diamond et al., 1998, has documented over 1800 pages of historical accounts from the early years of hockey to the modern day game, including game statistics and biographies of not only the NHL players but of the early franchise owners and league commissionaires that brought the game and the NHL to where it is today.

the NHL and its early influences on the sport delivery system of minor hockey that is unique to Canada.

Chapter two, part one, will describe the reach of NHL's influence into the fabric of Canadian culture which emerged early in the last century that coincides with the inception of the league. While the league experienced growing pains as a result of WWI, the depression of the 1930s, and the great influenza epidemic, eventually what is known today as the 'Original Six Teams' survived (Zweig, in Diamond et al., 1998). Players, as young as sixteen years of age, were 'owned' by teams and team management told these players how much they were 'worth' (Duff, in Diamond et al., 1998; Hunter, in Diamond, et al., 1998; Zweig, in Diamond et al., 1998). In many cases aspiring players left home to play on junior teams in order to develop and wait for 'their shot' at the parent club. This started the pattern of young boys leaving home to play hockey.

The ever-increasing attempts by NHL players to unionize in order to improve salaries and create a pension plan also marked the NHL-business in the early years (Duff, in Diamond, et al., 1998). Those NHL players who were fighting owners for better pay risked being sent down to the farm teams or getting traded (Hunter, in Diamond, et al., 1998).

In the post WWII era until the 1980 Entry Draft, the NHL became firmly entrenched into the Canadian society -- directly influencing amateur hockey. The drafting of young players went through an evolution of its own between 1967 and 1980. The NHL still provides Hockey Canada with financial compensation for players.

Junior hockey programs continue to select players as young as sixteen years of age and relocate them away from home to play hockey, continuing the pipeline to the

NHL. A young player away from home is at an increased risk for abuse (Brackenridge, 1997). Players are away from support structures-family and friends-and are placed into a competitive team environment with players up to 21 years of age, who themselves are trying to make it to the NHL and are not willing to lose their spot on the junior team to a rookie.

The nature of the junior hockey business gives coaches and management the power to trade a young player, not play him and outright cut / release him from their program. These people can label players with the NHL scouts as having a reputation for being difficult to handle

Part two of chapter two's literature review will focus on definitions of abuse towards children, harassment, and masculine culture utilized in this research project. Historically, children were referred to as the property of their parents. Within the context of the family unit the parents could maltreat a child without interference from an outside authority due to the lack of regulations pertaining to the rights and protections of children (Canadian Red Cross: Abuse Prevention Services Manual 1997).

Due in part to the ubiquitous nature of child rearing and the human values projected on children across cultures and time, some of these characteristics have transferred into today's society, providing the foundations for the lived experiences of modern day Canadian children. The premise of this research takes into account the nature of the hockey team as an extension of family (Kirby, et al., 2000). It is through the experiences of the Midget Triple A hockey coaches that symptoms of possible problematic behaviours directed at adolescent male players within the context of abusive

and / or harassing conduct encased within the male-dominated Midget Triple A hockey culture was explored.

The scope of this project is not to create new definitions of abuse, harassment, nor to justify male culture. However, the review of literature addresses the institutional, legal and sport use of 'abuse' terminology, supplies a framework for utilizing the term 'harassment', and explores male culture. The abuse literature review outlines the evolution of the academic research outside of sport that provided the basic terminology used in the sporting experience. Due to the ambiguity of the harassment term, a number of researchers included sexual harassment within the context of abuse, and it was unclear if other forms of harassment, like those outlined by Sport BC, were utilized in their research.

Masculine sport culture, combined with the aggressiveness of the sporting milieu (Hargreaves, 1986; Theberge, 1989) that encourages homophobia or superior heterosexual masculinity (Harek, 1986; David and Brannon, 1976, in Brannon and Juni, 1984; Messner and Sabo, 1990), may contribute to the lack of males reporting abuse or harassment, due to the perception of appearing 'weak'.

Chapter three describes the foundation of the research project. A qualitative interpretive methodology employing a semi-standardized interview technique (Berg, 1989) was utilized by the researcher to enquire into the perspectives of Triple A Hockey Coaches. From the transcribed interview, the data was subsequently revealed to the researcher who then logged and analyzed it according to the tenets of qualitative method, University of Manitoba's Research Ethics guidelines, and personal integrity.

Within chapter four, the data analysis was conducted concerning within the coaches' descriptions of the Midget Triple A environment. A qualitative interpretive analysis with Manitoba Midget Triple A Hockey Coaches on their perspectives regarding Midget Triple A team dynamics with an emphasis on communication and codes of conduct as these topics relate to abuse, harassment and masculine culture was explored.

Each of the seven coaches reviewed their version of the Midget Triple A culture as it was witnessed and experienced. Views shared by the seven coaches reflect certain key aspects regarding environment, communication, and the sub-culture of hockey at the Midget Triple A level. These aspects reveal behaviours and situations that could put players at risk to abusive and / or harassing conduct. In this chapter the following phenomena were covered: Triple A Organizations' administrative practices; league, organization, and team level codes of conduct; written and unwritten codes of conduct; competitive environment and consequences; communication; and the occurrences of disempowerment experienced by some of the coaches.

The seven coaches were frank and open with a majority of their interpretations of their Midget Triple A hockey experiences. Each coach took the time to discuss their personal philosophies with regards to both the written and unwritten codes of conduct that the players are expected to follow as team participants. The coaches were very open about their own personal experiences, during games, within the confines of the dressing room, and as a leader.

Chapter five delves into the limitations of the research as well as the recommendations from the analysis of the data and literature review. As in many other research settings, not only are the findings of the data important, so is the learning

process during the actual research procedure. The main drawbacks that emerged from this research include the method, the data gathering tools, the limited pool of candidates, and time constraints. It is the expectation that through this learning process that this researcher and others may have a greater understanding and appreciation in the ways people learn and cognitively comprehend their environment.

The recommendations deal with accountability within a volunteer based sport model: retention of coaches over a two year plan with a focused commitment towards the development of the over-all player, an outline for an independent third-party Coach Assessment Committee whose primary responsibility is to assess the coaches via questionnaire and observation, and the advent of a Player Representative that may follow-up complaints, act as resource for player education seminars, and sit in on coach / player suspensions for all the players in Midget Triple A.

For over 100 years Canada has been the proud parents and keepers of hockey. Like a rite of passage, Canadians have integrated the sport of hockey into their lives from childhood games, idolizing NHL players, to proudly cheering the teams on at the Olympics. However, the romantic illusion of hockey appears to be continuously overshadowed by a darker, more ominous reality

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Part I: NHL's Impact and Canadian Amateur Hockey**

#### **Introduction**

When looking at a qualitative interpretive analysis with Manitoba Midget Triple A Hockey Coaches on their perspectives regarding Midget A team dynamics with an emphasis on communication and codes of conduct as these topics relate to abuse, harassment and masculine culture a brief synopsis for understanding how Midget Triple A evolved into 1) a masculinized sporting environment, and 2) how this division is affected by the NHL at the game and business levels is necessary to provide background information for those individuals not familiar with the NHL and it's relationship with amateur hockey.

The following section is not a comprehensive history of the NHL. It is a brief description of the early beginnings of the NHL franchises' business practices between the owners and the players, the Union attempts by players in response to the owners' business practices, and the impact of the NHL's Entry Draft on amateur hockey in Canada.

## **NHL: In the Beginning**

### **1917-1939: The Birth of the NHL to Pre-WWII**

The National Hockey League (the League) was born from the ashes of the National Hockey Association in 1917. At the time, the League consisted of franchises in Ottawa, two in Montreal, and two in Toronto until ownerships were developed in Boston, New York, Detroit, and Chicago during the 1920s and 1930s (Diamond et al., 1998).

Due to WWI, influenza, the depression of the 1930s, and finally, WWII, the League, once home of twelve professional franchises through the 'roaring '20s', dwindled down to six: The Toronto Maple Leafs, the Montreal Canadiens, the Detroit Red Wings, the Boston Bruins, the New York Rangers, and the Chicago Black Hawks (Zweig, in Diamond et al., 1998). The teams were owned by rich and powerful businessmen. Some of these men also owned the arenas, sat on the NHL Board of Governors, and in some cases, owned portions of the other teams through various business holdings. In those days the owners were in a good position to make a lot of money from the league (Zweig, in Diamond et al., 1998). Unlike the rosters of today's teams, in the early years teams consisted of rosters with fewer than twelve players. Unlike today's teams with multi-person coaching staffs, the coach could be one of the players. Although teams were generating large sums of money through gate revenue and souvenir sales, not to mention the revenue from the arena concessions, players on average



were making \$200.00 per week over a six-month period (Duff, in Diamond et al., 1998; Zweig, in Diamond et al., 1998).

During the 1924-25-hockey season, the NHL expanded the number of games from 24 to 30. Most of the owners increased the player salaries on their team, but the Hamilton ownership did not. In protest, the Hamilton Tigers staged a walkout prior to their play-off series with the Montreal Canadiens. The Hamilton players were adamant that each one receive an additional \$200.00 for their services, therefore, a 'strike action' was utilized to bring weight to their demands. When the players refused to budge from their position, the league president, Mr. Frank Calder, awarded the series to the Canadiens. He fined each of the striking players \$200.00 and the fine was to accompany a written letter of apology from each player should that player want to be considered eligible to play in the 1925-26 season (Duff, in Diamond et al., 1998).

Always looking for more ways to generate interest in the NHL, and increase revenues, Conrad (Conn) Smyth had his team's (The Toronto Maple Leafs) games broadcast over the radio. Foster Hewitt's broadcasts of the Toronto Maple Leafs' games were carried across Canada by 20 different radio stations by 1933. Nearly one million listeners tuned into the games in a country of fewer than ten million people at the time (Zweig, in Diamond et al., 1998). Soon, Montreal-based teams were broadcasting their own games to the French and English-speaking fans of Quebec.

Through radio waves broadcasted into living rooms, pubs, and anywhere the signal could reach a radio, the passion for the NHL would bring a nation together every Saturday night, and continues in the present day in the form of the television broadcast—Hockey Night in Canada by the publicly owned Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. The

NHL heroes became national heroes to people who might never have actually seen them play in-person, but knew of their hockey skills through the voice of Foster Hewitt.

The revenue generating, big business aspect of the NHL characterized the 1917-1939 early era of the NHL. As a result of radio broadcasts, the NHL was accessible to nearly one-tenth the Canadian population. However, NHL players were not reaping the benefits of the increased revenue. Further exploitations of players was occurring during the 1940s and the players continued to fight the owners for better contracts.

### **1940s – 1979: Further Unionization Attempts to Entry Draft**

As the game matured through the 1940s to the expansion draft of 1967, the opportunity to play in the NHL propelled dreams of many boys playing hockey in blue-collar towns across Canada. Prior to the NHL's Russian Invasion and the influx of Western European players in the 1980s, the NHL was comprised of 95 % Canadian players. In order for the NHL teams to find talented players, boys as young as 16 years of age were signed to a C-form to ensure that these players would not become the property of other NHL teams.

[Players were] scouted and signed as teens and fed into the developmental system at the junior level. Once their signature was on a C-form-a promise of professional services that allowed a professional club to call them up within one year-they were literally the property of a team for life. (Hunter, in Diamond et al., 1998, p.59)

The extent of the agreement was still evident when a player retired from the game. So strong and binding was the signing of the C-form that should the retired player get an offer for a position within a different hockey club, he would have to get permission from his former club prior to accepting the offer (Hunter, in Diamond et al., 1998).

The Canadian Amateur Hockey Association (CAHA; today they are known by the corporate name, Hockey Canada) of that era did have officials that resented the NHL's domination at the amateur level. An 'uneasy alliance' developed between the CAHA and the NHL. The CAHA was the main pipeline for players participating within the NHL. In return the NHL made an annual block payment to the CAHA as financial compensation for these players (Hunter, in Diamond et al., 1998).

For the six NHL clubs to retain the large number of players who were not yet ready to make their small rosters, NHL teams sponsored amateur clubs and paid salaries to amateur players across the country, to the dismay of supporters of small, local amateur hockey programs. There was little that the supporters of amateur sport could do as the CAHA was at the 'money trough' of the NHL.

Due to the amateur structure of hockey in Canada, there were few checks in place to ensure that the best interests of the players would be respected. The CAHA, compensated by large amounts of money, certainly were not going to rock the boat. Older players trying to maintain a living were in tough competition for a position on the six teams. Players were bought and traded on a whim by the owners. Owners told players what they were worth and there was little in the way of negotiation. Any player could be shipped out to the farm team if their performance in that evening's game was not up to par, or for any other 'infractions' (Hunter, in Diamond et al., 1998).

Finally, in the season of 1946-47 some players were uniting in an attempt to create a players' union to fight the owners for more money and better post-career conditions. The owners conceded to the players demands for a pension fund but the union would not be formed. However, in 1957, under the leadership of "Terrible Ted" Lindsay, the players, with the help of a New York-based lawyer, again tried to unite. The owners crushed the attempts made by the players and "On July 23, 1957, Lindsay was traded to the Chicago Black Hawks as punishment for his attempts to form a strong players' union. Chicago had missed the playoffs four years in a row and in 10 of the last 11 seasons..." (Zweig, in Diamond et al., 1998, p.1788).<sup>2</sup>

What characterized this era of the NHL was the impact of the NHL-business on the amateur leagues and the National Sport Governing Body, the CAHA. With so few NHL roster spots available for young players, some Canadian Junior Hockey programs provided playing opportunities for these signed players. These select junior programs had NHL-paid young stars drawing fans into the stands and the junior club would reap the ticket sales revenue.

In 1967 the players were finally able to form the National Hockey League Players' Association (NHLPA). However, it would be almost ten years (1976) before they would become a certified union. Until then a player,

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<sup>2</sup> The author recognizes that many NHL players' biographies, in written and documentary format, numerous interviews, and movies that outlined the lives of the early NHL player's especially around the early struggles the players had with the NHL Owners exist. The intention of this section is to identify how the NHL influenced the development of the Amateur Hockey programs in Canada, as well as its impact on a young Canadian culture.

... was subject completely to the whims of the team owners, he could be promoted, demoted, traded, buried in the minor leagues, and paid whatever salary the owner deemed appropriate-all without recourse. Players lived in constant fear of losing their jobs, whether through injury, fading skills, or by running afoul of management. (Hunter, in Diamond et al., 1998, p. 61)

1967 not only brought in the NHLPA, but the league for the first time in 16 years doubled from what is known today as the original six to equal twelve franchises in total. Because the league added the six new teams, a formalized draft of new prospects was developed. The first amateur draft had been held in 1963. However, at that time teams still had protected players who were ineligible for the draft because the players had already become property of an NHL team. It was not until the 1969 draft that all teams would have an equal opportunity to select the best juniors, as these players were no longer sponsored by NHL clubs. Before that draft, players as young as sixteen years of age were signed by NHL clubs, even though the League had changed the draft age to twenty in 1967 (Tredree, in Diamond et al., 1998).

In response to the upstart World Hockey Association, a rival for professional players, the NHL revisited the issue of lowering the amateur draft age to add depth to the talent pool of available players. The League decided in 1974 that teams could select one "eighteen year old prospect...with underage selections limited to the first two rounds" (Tredree, in Diamond et al., 1998, p. 296).

As the young pre-NHL players were fighting their way to the NHL, their junior teams and the CAHA were receiving financial compensation; the then-current NHL players were waging their battle with the owners for better salaries and post-career