

# Globe Sports

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## HOCKEY MOTHERLODE OF TALENT

# Innovation helps town strike gold with minors

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NEW LISKEARD, ONT.

It looks chaotic. The children are moving in all directions. There are more than 40 of them on the ice, cutting, turning, weaving, giving passes and taking passes. Over the course of an hour, they rarely stop skating. Several escape, at the last second, what appear to be certain collisions.

It is practice night at the New Liskeard Recreation Centre. The temperature outside is -30, but it feels even colder near the arena, which is at the foot of town beside Lake Timiskaming. The sun is dropping quickly, the school day has been over for more than an hour and, in the chill of the rink, the kids are learning hockey.

Northern Ontario has a rich history of producing great players. Frank Mahovlich came from Timmins. Tim Horton's home town was Cochrane. Ted Lindsay and Dick Duff are from Kirkland Lake. The Hillman brothers, the Redmond brothers, the Plagers and the Paiements all grew up in the area. Dave Keon, across the boundary in Rouyn-Noranda, Que., wasn't far away.

This extraordinary amount of talent was, to some degree, the by-product of a rivalry among the wealthy mine owners of the region almost a century ago. After the First World War, the owners recruited the best athletes in the province to play for their fastball teams. The ringers were not only paid handsomely to win ball games, but also rewarded with jobs in the mines. The men stayed, raised families and produced children who grew up to become, like their fathers, great athletes. The difference was, the second generation played hockey.

In the old days, the kids learned the game by playing shinny on the lakes and sloughs behind the



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### Hockey profiles

More than 530,000 boys and girls play minor hockey in communities across Canada annually. The Canadian Hockey Association estimates another 250,000 people volunteer their time as administrators, coaches, managers, trainers, and time-keepers. A five-part series that begins today profiles some of the people who call the arena their second home and describes the experiences they have participating in our national game.

mines. Today, most of the mines have been shut down and youth hockey has evolved, as it has everywhere, into a structured game played in arenas. But on this evening at New Liskeard's rink, the activity on the ice looks a lot like the pond hockey of many years ago.

The players are skating up and down, and laterally, crisscrossing and turning, and always carrying a puck. The children, girls and boys aged nine to 12, are also moving at a high speed.

At centre ice, directing traffic, is the man responsible for this confusion.

Over the course of a few years, Ron Davidson has changed radically the way the game here is taught. He calls it organized chaos.

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Ron Davidson, right, has radically changed the way hockey is taught in New Liskeard, Ont. He calls it organized chaos. 'They just get addicted to it,' he says. 'It's like being in the middle of a video game.'

## Coach's curriculum has drills that are executed at high speed

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"When the kids are on the ice, they have to react quickly and make adjustments all the time," he said. "And they love it. From a coaching point of view, it's fun to watch them. They just get addicted to it. It's like being in the middle of a video game."

Hockey Night in Canada announcer Chris Cuthbert, who met Davidson when both attended Queen's University, says he doesn't know anyone more committed to training children.

"You don't have to be with Ron very long to know how enthusiastic he is about hockey," he said. "I bumped into him in an airport two years ago and he had just come back from a hockey school he was running in the United States. I just asked what he was doing, and he got into a 20-minute passionate discussion about how he loves working with kids and the progress he's making."

Davidson, 45, is the Crown attorney for the district of Timiskaming, but his background in hockey exceeds his years in the Ontario justice system. He played three years of major-junior hockey in Cornwall and Ottawa, was a member of Canada's national team for five years and played in the 1980 Olympics. He was on the Queen's varsity squad. There were also professional stops in Sweden, Switzerland and France. For 16 years, he worked at the hockey schools of Howie Meeker, the former Toronto Maple Leaf and television personality who stressed skill development.

Davidson's curriculum consists of top-level stick and skating drills executed at high speeds — the sorts of things that have been standard fare in European hockey for years. The results have been remarkable. Last winter, Davidson took a girls peewee team to a tournament in Barrie to play against entries from larger Ontario centres such as Burlington and Hamilton. It was no contest.

"We had only 14 girls who played hockey at the peewee level," he said. "So there was no tryout. They all made the team. But we won our first game 14-0. The next game was 18-0 and then 13-0. They put together a select team and we won 3-0. We just went home and let the other teams play for the championship."

Davidson volunteers as a development coach on three New Liskeard teams and also coaches boys aged four to six playing tyke. A few years ago, his girls novice peewee travelling team won the Northern Ontario Hockey Association championship. Playing in a boys league, the girls had a 30-3 record.

New Liskeard, it's worth noting, has a population of 5,500.

But, despite the success, it took a while for Davidson's training methods to be accepted by parents and minor-hockey volunteers.

"After a couple of months, we started beating teams by 12 and 15 goals," Davidson said. "But even

then, a lot of parents couldn't understand why I wasn't teaching the kids, quote, hockey. 'Why don't you teach them how to come out of their own end. Why don't you teach them systems.'

"They didn't understand it until we won the NOHA championship. I remember we won the final game 9-0, then, all of a sudden, it started to register."

It started to register because Davidson's teams were winning, even though, paradoxically, winning wasn't what he was attempting to accomplish. He didn't teach defensive systems, which supposedly win games, because the kids end up standing around on the ice listening to a coach instead of skating and handling a puck. He did not run conventional drills. But the kids started to win, because they had more talent than their opposition. They instinctively executed plays and break-outs because they had been allowed to think for themselves in practices.

"When these kids are given the opportunity to handle the puck all the time in practice, they start to learn how to create, make things happen and make decisions instinctively on the ice," Davidson said. "It's remarkable."

Anita Newport, whose daughter Natasha plays for the girls peewee travelling team, says there still is resistance from some of the older volunteers, but the Davidson supporters outnumber the holdouts.

### 'It's amazing'

"It's amazing what Ron does," said Mike Wilson, whose son Spencer plays for the atom travelling team. "There's no wasted time. No standing around."

Simon Chartrand, who assists in practices and whose daughter Carly plays for the girls peewee travelling team, skates over to the boards.

"Everybody should be doing this," he said. "It's an unbelievable program. It's all about puck control. The kids are always moving and handling the puck. They feel they are on an outdoor rink and it frees them to make decisions."

One of the issues discussed by the parents is the Canadian Hockey Association's decision to allow bodychecking for players as young as nine.

Gaetan Gosselin, the head coach of New Liskeard's girls peewee travelling team, says he believes parents are still 60 per cent in favour of bodychecking because "that's how it was when they were playing."

"But when I was a kid, we learned to stickhandle and shoot when we were playing road hockey," Gosselin said. "There was no bodychecking in road hockey."

Wilson calls the CHA decision ridiculous.

"They don't have bodychecking in Quebec, and you really see the difference," he said. "Their game is all about skills and skating. Our guys are worried about getting hit. They're afraid to touch the puck."

Davidson doesn't believe

bodychecking belongs in youth hockey, but notes that it is perceived to be the Canadian way of playing the game. For old-school volunteers and hockey commentators, the term skill development is almost a pejorative.

"If you promote skill development, you're a patsy, right?" Davidson said. "I think it's really unfortunate. What they don't understand is if you take players who are highly skilled and combine it with Canadian grit and passion, you have an amazing player."

Davidson says he is teaching six-year-olds skills that he didn't learn until he was 20, and only then by accident. For example, there is a turn called an outside-edge reverse, in which a player plants his foot, carves on the outside edge of the skate and reverses direction. Glenn Anderson, who later played for the Edmonton Oilers, taught it to Davidson when they were on the Olympic team together. When Davidson played pro hockey in Switzerland, a Czech coach taught him to shoot off his back foot.

"Shooting off your back foot is a very deceptive way to fire the puck," he said. "But if you want players to reach a high level in these skills, you have to start them doing things at an early age. And once you learn how to do that, it completely changes your ability to play in the game."

"I mean, there are skills and then there are skills. When we watch some of the Europeans play at a high speed and somebody totally understands what they're doing with their feet and hands and their body position, it's an incredible thing."

A fundamental difference between the Canadian and European systems of teaching hockey to children is the quality of coaching. In Europe, for the most part, professional coaches are hired by sports clubs. Canada uses volunteers.

But the New Liskeard kids appear to be a privileged group. They are not in the high-stress hockey environment of the major centres, where travelling teams play as many as 120 games a season, where kids ride the bench and where they are emotionally and sometimes physically abused by parents and coaches. In New Liskeard, the kids appear to be learning the game in a sane environment and are receiving the best instruction.

Forty and 50 years ago, this region regularly turned out stars who went on to play in the National Hockey League. Perhaps, because of what's going on now, it will happen again.

"There's no reason in the world we can't, as a country, produce more Wayne Gretzkys and Mario Lemieuxs," Davidson said. "I know they're exceptional athletes, but what we don't understand is that kids need the opportunity to teach themselves as well. There's a beauty to high-level skills, an artistry. There's no reason Canada can't produce many, many players who have incredible skills."