

# IIHF Study on Europeans going to North America

## 1 INTRODUCTION AND CLAIM

The following is a study based on research of European players who were drafted and/or signed from IIHF clubs and who went on to play in the National Hockey League (NHL) and/or in the minor leagues and/or in the Canadian major junior leagues (CHL)<sup>1</sup>. The research includes three categories of Europeans:

1. All Europeans with a minimum of 400<sup>2</sup> NHL-games upon retirement, including players retiring following the 2005-06 season. (93 players)
2. Europeans in the NHL or/and in the minor leagues between 2000 and 2006. (621 players)
3. Europeans drafted to the CHL 1997-2006. (575 players)

This study employs a 1 to 5 scale to categorize European players:

5 – Superstar, trophy winner, on a NHL all-star team (Example: Forsberg, Lidstrom, Jagr)

4 – Star, first-liner (Example: Koivu, Ohlund, Marian Hossa)

3 – Solid NHLer, plays every game (Example: Zednik, Sturm, Holmstrom)

2 – Marginal players, frequent “healthy scratches” or callups (Example: Peter Buzek, Denis Shvidki, Branislav Mezei)

1 – Non impact, minor leaguers (Example: Jakub Cutta, Joakim Lindstrom, Zdenek Blatny)

**The major research of the 621 Europeans shows the following:**

- 62.5 percent (388 players) are non-impact, marginal or below average (graded 1, 2 or 3-.)
- 133 of these players have not played one NHL game.
- 286 players (46.1 percent) have (as of September 25, 2006) returned to Europe without reaching 400 NHL games.
- 88.0 percent of the players with extended stays (100 games or more) in the minor leagues are non-impact, marginal or below average (graded 1, 2 or 3-.)
- 86.9 percent of the players with at least one year in the CHL are non-impact, marginal or below average (graded 1, 2, or 3-.)

**Based on the result of the research, this study makes the following claims:**

- a) NHL clubs sign too many European players of marginal talent (graded 3 and lower) who go on to play insignificant roles in the NHL. Such players take a NHL or minor league roster spot which could be filled with a North American player of equal value while the European player in question is a significant loss for his European club. **This study will argue that a healthy ratio between North Americans and Europeans in NHL is 80/20<sup>3</sup>** (80 percent North Americans/20 percent Europeans, as opposed to the current 70/30).

A lengthy stay in the minor leagues does not improve a player’s chance for a successful NHL career. The research shows that the number of European players spending significant time in the minors and later becoming impact players (graded 3+ and above) in the NHL is minimal.

<sup>1</sup> The CHL is an umbrella organization for the three Canadian major junior leagues; Western Hockey League (WHL), Ontario Hockey League (OHL) and Quebec Major Junior Hockey League (QMJHL). We will refer to those leagues as CHL in this study.

<sup>2</sup> 400 games is generally considered as a minimum number of games for a “career”. It takes 6-7 seasons on average to accumulate that number of games, minimum five. 400 games was earlier a NHLPA games played minimum for fully receiving the Senior Player benefit pension plan.

<sup>3</sup> See pages 12-13 for the outline of the likelihood of an increased share of North Americans in the NHL.

- b) A European player of top talent (graded 3+ and above) is normally good enough to step directly onto an NHL roster. The player, and his future NHL club, profits from polishing his skills in his European club before moving to the NHL.
- c) Players, who are rushed to the NHL before reaching the necessary level of maturity, are hurt in their development.
- d) Playing in the CHL does not improve a player's chance for a successful NHL career. European players taking the CHL route, often have short and mediocre NHL careers and generally become graded 3 and lower. Many these players, never play a single NHL game and return as disillusioned and lesser players.
- e) The often used reasoning by scouts and agents *that going to North America, the minor leagues or the CHL, earlier increases a player's chance of getting an NHL-contract* is a misconception.

The above points suggest that too many Europeans are either:

- a) signed with NHL-potential without being NHL-ready
- b) signed without being of NHL-potential

## 2 THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE CURRENT SITUATION

The effects of the above scenarios affect the growth of talent in the European leagues as the European teams rush immature players from their development system to replace players who have gone prematurely to North America or who were signed too early without having the necessary credentials to compete in the NHL. Hence, the natural time to replenish the European talent stock becomes too short. This hurts the European teams, their leagues, the players and the NHL, who will have less high-end talent to choose from once the development system of European players has been seriously depleted.

It is not to say that the 62.5 percent of European players in the lesser categories (1, 2, 3-) should be cut by NHL clubs immediately and replaced by North Americans. But with a new awareness, a process can begin leading to the 80/20 ratio in the NHL, with no more than 10-20 Europeans in the minor leagues (as opposed to the current 60-70). With more accurate scouting and a patient approach with signing, the number of lesser graded Europeans (3 and below) can be reduced. Those NHL-roster spots can be taken by Canadians recruited from the CHL and Americans recruited from the NCAA.

If the NHL found a way whereby fewer Europeans of the 1, 2 and 3- categories played in the NHL and fewer still in the minors, then these players could remain as important contributors to their club teams in Europe. Thus increasing the quality of play in Europe and developing the talents of more players with NHL potential. Hence, using fewer Europeans could be profitable for the NHL.

One of the most respected European based NHL-scouts said this when interviewed for this study:

"In my opinion, the top European leagues have lost in quality in the last years. There is no doubt that this is because of the stream of players going to North America, where many players do not develop as they become career minor leaguers. One ensuing problem is that European prospects have fewer and fewer role models in the European leagues. I am convinced that this depleting will affect the quality of the European players that the NHL will recruit in the future."

However, most European clubs accept the fact the best players go to the NHL and few would think of denying them this chance to prove themselves and to become financially independent. Many European clubs are proud to show that their programs have developed players who are of NHL caliber.

One European Director of Sports and Player Development of a major club team (that has seen more than 40 players from this club only being drafted or signed by NHL club) said when interviewed for the purpose of this study:

“We don’t mind when fully developed players, who are ready to step right to the NHL, leave us. We congratulate them, wish them luck and we are all proud that our program has developed players whom the NHL clubs are prepared to reward with large contracts. But what is bothering, is when the NHL clubs sign prospects who are marginal players either on our club or on other clubs in our league. Either, those players simply don’t have the potential or they may have potential but still have a long way to go. We know that those players can’t possibly play in the NHL and of course they are sent to the minors. We think that by staying with us for one or two more years, we can develop the player better than if the player is sent to a minor league team because we put more time and emphasis on practice and skill development.”

In all fairness, European hockey clubs are also beneficiaries since the chance to play in the NHL produces more motivated European hockey juniors, if one compares the situation with the 70s and even 80s. Most European hockey players aged 10-16 say their goal is eventually to play in the NHL. (After 16 sometimes reality sets in). The main problem is that too many players with very limited NHL potential leave, while others, who have NHL potential, leave too early.

What often is lost in this debate – especially on the part of media, fans and other people in the North American hockey community – is that the top European clubs are in a position where they develop talent both for their own club and for the NHL, although the latter is not what the European development programs are designed for. For example, Finnish top club Kärpät Oulu lost seven of their top players to the NHL in the two last seasons. Respect must be paid to the fact that the objectives of the European clubs are to recruit and develop players for their programs with the goal of winning the national championship, as they strive for it as ambitiously as any NHL club who wants to win the Stanley Cup. The mandate that European clubs have from their constituency (fans, club members and sponsors) is to perform at the highest possible level in the national championship. The mandate is not to produce players for the NHL. This has become a reality, due to the NHL’s demand for skilled players and to fill approximately 970 roster spots annually. The majority of clubs accepts this fact and deal with it in a pragmatic and sensible way. What they desire is a better understanding from their North American counterparts for those circumstances, as they resent being considered solely as an overseas feeder system for the NHL.

The European leagues have delivered a disproportionate share of players (25 – 30 percent or 260 – 300 players) to the NHL in the last ten years, as the NHL has signed between 45 and 70 European players prior to each season in the last decade (with the exception for the 2004-2005 lockout season). The total number of Europeans playing annually in North American professional leagues is between 330 and 350 with 50-70 Europeans playing in the minor leagues.

Considering the interest that hockey enjoys in Canada and the USA, the greater number of registered players and the vastly superior number of rinks, it’s realistic that the Canadian and American developmental systems should assume a larger share in developing NHL-players. (*See pages 12-13*). Both the CHL and the NCAA are by definition developmental systems from which players graduate after reaching a certain age (20-22). The American Hockey League (AHL) and other minor leagues in North America have accepted their role as developmental leagues that host the NHL’s affiliate (farm) teams.

**This study does not – and this can not be emphasized enough – in any way intend to restrict free movement for professional players or deny players to achieve their goals, whatever those goals may be.**



The objective is to show to all interested parties which path – based on the experience and figures gathered since the early 70s – is the most realistic and viable one for a European hockey player to become a successful NHLer and which phases of development must be completed before the player is mature for the NHL.

It is likewise important to state:

- A skilled and fundamentally well educated player with NHL-potential and motivation will reach the NHL regardless of which route he takes.
- A player with no NHL-potential or with potential but lacking the necessary “drive”, will either not reach the NHL or become a fringe player regardless of which route he takes.

**But, this research will show that a skilled, well educated player with NHL-potential and motivation may end up as a 3 or lower player albeit his potential was higher if he, or the ones who decide about the recruitment, make the wrong decisions during the crucial time of development.**

Larry Pleau, the General Manager of the NHL St. Louis Blues, a former Team USA Olympian and GM of various U.S. national teams, said this to *Sports Illustrated* in July 2006: “I have never seen a guy play down too long, but I have seen many players play up too quick.”

When interviewing people connected to the NHL (scouts, club officials etc) for this research, there were two, almost defiant, standard answers when presenting this case.

1. “If a kid gets to play six NHL games, he may have fulfilled his dream. So what if he doesn’t make it any further and becomes a career minor leaguer?”
2. “Why shouldn’t the Europeans play in the minor leagues and pay their dues like their North American counterparts?”

The first reply is an attempt to deflect the issue. If the player’s potential was six NHL games, then there is nothing more to say. But if the player had potential to be a 3+ player but ends his NHL career after six NHL games, then something went wrong. **The essence of this study is allowing European players develop to the best of their abilities.**

The reply to the second question is: the objective in signing European players to NHL contracts is not to “pay dues” in the minors, but to have them play at least 400 games in the NHL. “Paying dues” with extended stays in the minors seldom leads to 400 NHL games.

This study targets the IIHF national member associations and their managers of youth development, the IIHF-affiliated European clubs, their managers and youth coaches, player agents and the prospects themselves, their parents, the NHL, it’s general managers, directors of player personnel & development and their European scouts.

**The objective is to create awareness leading to a more balanced proportion of Europeans in the NHL. Players graded 3+ and higher would go to the NHL, while those graded 3 and lower would remain in Europe, until developing into players with NHL potential.**



### 3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The large scale recruiting of European players to the NHL started in the early 70s with Swedes Thommie Bergman, Borje Salming and Inge Hammarstrom being the first to play full seasons for their NHL teams in 1972 - 1973. For circa 15 years, mostly Swedes and Finns were recruited and signed (the early Europeans didn't have to be drafted to be signed) and only with the fall of the Iron Curtain in the late 80s did recruiting also begin to include Russians and Czechoslovaks.

Five nations (Czech Republic, Finland, Russia, Slovakia and Sweden) send the overwhelming majority of players to the NHL. Since the mid-90s, the players from these nations are represented in double digits in the NHL. Players from other countries (Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Ukraine, Norway, etc.) are in single digits.

Since 1995, 25 to 30 percent of the players in the NHL are Europeans.

The breakdown of the European contingent in the NHL since 2000 is:

**2000-2001:** 280 Europeans out of 990 – 28.3 percent

CZE 70, RUS 69, SWE 47, FIN 34, SVK 29, UKR 7, GER 6, SUI 4, LAT 3, LTU 2, POL 2, NOR 2, KAZ 1, BLR 1.

**2001-2002:** 293 Europeans out of 968 – 30.3 percent

CZE 78, RUS 62, SWE 53, FIN 42, SVK 32, GER 6, LAT 6, UKR 4, POL 2, KAZ 2, LTU 2, SUI 1, NOR 1, AUT 1, BLR 1.

**2002-2003:** 293 Europeans out of 984 – 29.7 percent

CZE 80, RUS 65, SWE 58, FIN 38, SVK 30, GER 6, LAT 5, POL 2, KAZ 2, SUI 2, UKR 1, LTU 1, NOR 1, AUT 1, BLR 1.

**2003-2004:** 300 Europeans out of 1018 – 29.5 percent

CZE 76, RUS 64, SWE 53, FIN 37, SVK 35, GER 7, UKR 5, KAZ 4, LAT 4, SUI 4, AUT 3, BLR 2, LTU 2, NOR 2, POL 2.

**2005-2006:** 263<sup>4</sup> Europeans out of 961 – 27.37 percent<sup>5</sup>

CZE 65, RUS 51, SWE 47, FIN 39, SVK 32, GER 8, SUI 4, BLR 3, AUT 3, LAT 3, POL 2, KAZ 2, FRA 1, NOR 1, UKR 1, LTU 1.

The peak was in 2001-2002, when one-third of NHL players were from Europe.

Looking at the recent NHL Entry Drafts, roughly one-third of the selected prospects are from Europe, with 2000, 2001 and 2002 being exceptions. In 2001, almost every second player drafted was a European.

**Recent History of Europeans at the NHL Draft:**

**1996:** 58 (out of 241) players drafted (9 Rounds) – 24.1 %

**1997:** 63 (out of 246) players drafted (9 Rounds) – 25.6%

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<sup>4</sup> The above statistics include every player who has played at least one game in the NHL during that season. During the 2005-2006-season an additional number of 66 Europeans played in the NHL-affiliated teams in the American Hockey League (AHL). **So the total number of Europeans on NHL-clubs' rosters was 329.**

<sup>5</sup> The decrease from almost 30 percent in the pre-lockout 2003-04 season to 27.26 percent in the post-lockout 2005-06-season was mostly due to the fact the several European players decided to remain in Europe after having spent the lockout playing there.

**1998:** 75 (out of 258) players drafted (9 Rounds) – 29.1%  
**1999:** 94 (out of 272) players drafted (9 Rounds) – 34.5%  
**2000:** 123 (out of 293) players drafted (9 Rounds) – 42.0%  
**2001:** 142 (out of 289) players drafted (9 Rounds) – **49.1%**  
**2002:** 124 (out of 291) players drafted (9 Rounds) – 42.6%  
**2003:** 103 (out of 292) players drafted (9 Rounds) – 35.3%  
**2004:** 97 (out of 291) players drafted (9 Rounds) – 33.3%  
**2005:** 57 (out of 230) players drafted (7 Rounds) – 24.8%  
**2006:** 70 (out of 213) players drafted (7 Rounds) – 32.9%

## 4 TOO MANY EUROPEANS OF MARGINAL VALUE ARE SIGNED

The group in the major research (the 621 Europeans who played in the NHL or in the affiliated minor pro leagues in 2000-2006) is categorized into three groups<sup>6</sup>:

1. **Experienced Group:** Players with a significant number of years in a top European league before going to North America and no extended minor league play: 173 players.
2. **Minor league Group:** Players with extended stays (more than 100 games) in the minor leagues often after a short career in a top European league: 242 players.
3. **CHL Group:** Players with virtually no experience in a top European league followed by at least one season in the CHL: 183 players.

**That spending significant time in top European leagues reflects the success of a future NHL-career, is seen in these numbers:**

- Out of the 621 players in this researched group, 117 players were identified as successful or very successful, players graded 3+ and above. No less than 102 (87.2 %) of these successful players are in the Experienced Group 1. The average grade of this group is: **3.47**.
- From the **Minor league Group 2** of 242 players, only six graded 3+ and above were found. No less than 213 players (88.0%) who are non-impact, marginal or below average were identified in this group. The average grade of this group is: **1.76**.
- From the **CHL Group 3** of 183 players, only nine that are 3+ and above were found. No less than 159 players (86.9%) who are non-impact, marginal or below average were identified in this group. The average grade of this group is: **1.66**.

Other key average numbers – further demonstrating the superiority of the Experienced Group – are:

- 4.2 years in a European top league before transferring to North America.
- 534.6 NHL games<sup>7</sup>
- 95.5% of their games in North America are played in the NHL (= minimal time in the minors.)

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The numbers show emphatically that a skilled and mature European player (with potential of being 3+, 4, 5), with two to five year's experience in the major league in a top five European nation, can become an impact player on

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<sup>6</sup> The remaining group of players does not fit any pattern

<sup>7</sup> Many of the players in this group are in the early stages of their careers and their naturally low number of games brings down this average.

an NHL-team, without spending significant time in the minor leagues. For those players the CHL route is not an option.

Further research on the major group of 621 analyzed the path of Europeans who signed an NHL-contract after spending at least one year in the CHL. The findings showed that out of the CHL-group of 183 players, 165 (90.2%) went on to play at least one season in the AHL, while only 18 (9.8%) managed to take the direct step from the CHL to the NHL. From the group of 165 players with that pattern, only 14 players (8.5 percent) graded 3 and better were identified. The average grade of those 165 players was 1.44.

Meaning: that once a player competes at least one season in the CHL, he has less than a 10 percent chance to avoid being in a group that has an average grade of 1.44, the lowest grade of all the groups.

**The numbers show forcefully that Europeans going to the NHL directly from European leagues is vastly superior to the group that toils in the CHL and/or in the minor leagues.**

**The numbers do not support the theories that a European player needs “adjustment” in the minors or “learning the North American game” in the CHL to become a successful NHL-player.**

A European scout, who has been involved in evaluating talent for the NHL for more than 20 years said when interviewed for this study: “Far too many Europeans leave too early. I have yet to see a player who has missed an NHL contract by staying home a couple of years, playing one or two world championships and leaving when he is ready. My advice is always: if not sure, stay.”

The talent level and pace at which a player develops varies. A super-talent like Ilya Kovalchuk (grade 5) could go to the NHL immediately after being drafted. Mats Sundin (4+) didn't need more than one more year in Europe following his draft season to become an impact player in the NHL. But players of 5 and 4+ caliber are rare, and many who eventually are graded as 4 or 5, develop at a slower pace.

Two recent examples of players who broke in to the NHL in the 2005-06-season, are telling in terms of patience and diligent skill development:

- Alexander Ovechkin had four year's experience in the Russian professional league, two IIHF World Championships and one World Cup of Hockey before he played his first NHL game. His 52 goals and 54 assists for 106 points in his first NHL season indicate that these were well invested pre-NHL career years.
- Henrik Lundqvist absorbed five seasons in the Swedish Elite League and was on three Swedish World Championship teams before he, at the age of 23, and five years past his draft year, played his first NHL game and became an instant star. (Lundqvist also shattered another myth; that a European goalie needs to learn the North American game in the minors).

The list of players whose NHL careers can be quality-wise determined, and who have the above listed pre-NHL career pattern, includes: Daniel Alfredsson (4+), Peter Bondra (4+), Pavel Bure (5), Sergei Fedorov (5), Peter Forsberg (5), Marian Gaborik (4), Martin Havlat (4), Milan Hejduk (4), Bobby Holik (4), Jaromir Jagr (5), Kenny Jonsson (4), Darius Kasparaitis (4), Saku Koivu (4), Alexei Kovalev (4+), Jere Lehtinen (4), Nicklas Lidstrom (5), Henrik Lundqvist (4), Fredrik Modin (4-), Alexander Mogilny (4+), Markus Naslund (5), Mattias Ohlund (4), Alexander Ovechkin (5), Joni Pitkanen (4), Petr Prucha (3+), Daniel & Henrik Sedin (3+), Teemu Selanne (5), Alexei Yashin (4), Henrik Zetterberg (4), Alexei Zhamnov (4), Alexei Zhitnik (4) and Sergei Zubov (4+).

## 5 THE RETIRED PLAYERS' GROUP SUPPORTS OUR CLAIM

When analyzing the 93 retired NHLers with more than 400 NHL games, the following numbers parallel numbers from the major research of the 621 players:

- 72 of the 93 players (77.4 percent) either didn't play a single minor league game or spent minimal time (less than 10 games) in the minors.
- Only four players recorded games in the CHL: Valeri Bure (grade 3+), Krzysztof Oliwa (2), Esa Tikkanen<sup>8</sup> (4) and Vitaliy Yachmenev (2+)
- Even when disregarding the high number of involuntary years spent in the European leagues by the former Soviet players (who were not allowed to leave for the NHL until the collapse of the Soviet Union) the average number of years spent in the European leagues before leaving for the NHL was 5.
- 45 of the 93 players can be graded as 3+, 4 or 5. Out of this high-quality group only Valeri Bure played in the CHL. The total amount of minor league games between those 45 players is 66 games, with two of the players, Ulf Samuelsson (36) and Esa Tikkanen (15) combining for 51 out of the 66 games.

The overall pattern among the retired group for a successful European NHLer with more than 400 games was:

- a) Four-five years in his European club before signing with an NHL club.
- b) National team experience during those four-five years.
- c) Virtually no minor league or no CHL games after going to North America.
- d) Immediate impact in the NHL.

The average length of an NHL career among the group of 3+, 4 and 5 players was 12.8 years.

## 6 "ADJUSTMENT" IS A SMALL ISSUE FOR MODERN PLAYERS

When many of the players in the retired group made NHL debuts, there was a considerable difference in how the NHL and European games were played. Throughout the 70s and 80s it was virtually two different games, so huge was the disparity (small rinks, considerable difference regarding the physical aspect, officiating and rules). The majority of the players in the retired group never played on a NHL-sized rink before signing an NHL contract.

But the players with the above-mentioned pre-NHL career pattern – and with the necessary skill and maturity level – still made a smooth transition to the North American game, not needing any substantial adjustment period.

Today, the NHL game and that in the European leagues is more similar than what the pioneers experienced. Most young players who sign NHL contracts today are no strangers to small rinks (many play international tournaments in North America before signing NHL contracts). Due to the exchange of players between North America and Europe, and especially due to the recent conformity in rule interpretations between the NHL and the IIHF, the difference in styles is smaller.

**One major misconception regarding recruiting Europeans to the NHL is that the Europeans need "to adjust" in order to play "the North American way".**

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<sup>8</sup> Tikkanen played one season of junior hockey in Canada before he returned to Finland to compete three full seasons at IFK Helsinki before signing with Edmonton.



If there is nothing else that this study can accomplish, it should dispel this frequently used myth to justify sending prematurely signed Europeans to a minor league club or when giving a 17-year old European the advice to go to the CHL.

The fact is – from Borje Salming to Henrik Lundqvist, Alexander Ovechkin, Jussi Jokinen and Alexander Steen – that a player doesn't need any more adjustment than the one he gets during his first NHL training camp and the one he naturally goes through during the early stages of his first season in the NHL.

## 7 EUROPE CANNOT PRODUCE NHLers AT CURRENT RATE

There is no doubt that Europeans have a major impact in the NHL, but when broken down into the five quality-indicating categories, the result is (based on 2005-2006 NHL rosters, including players in the minor leagues, a total of 329 Europeans):

- Superstars (grade 5) – 4 percent
- Stars (grade 4) – 6 percent
- Solid contributors (grade 3) – 44 percent
- (High-end solid contributors, grade 3+)* – 20 percent
- Fringe, non-impact players (grade 1, 2) – 45 percent

10 percent are in the superstar/star category (5, 4) while the rest are split between the “middle of the pack” (3) and the “fringe” or “non-impact” categories (1, 2).

From 2000-2006, prior to each season the NHL has signed 45 to 70 players from European leagues.

During these seasons, a low percentage of the signed Europeans had immediate NHL potential and a vast majority didn't make it to the NHL in the first year and were sent to the minor leagues.

During the 3-year period of the 2001-2004 IIHF-NHL Player Transfer Agreement, the NHL signed 194 players.

01-02: 73 players  
02-03: 60 players  
03-04: 61 players

When the status of those 194 players was re-evaluated in July 2005 (with full records of the 2001-2004-period) it showed that only 40 of the 194 players were solid NHLers (grade 5, 4, 3) or genuine prospects. That is a success rate of 21 percent with 40 out of 194. (*The definition of success in this context is being on an NHL roster*).

The remaining 79 percent or 154 players were in three categories:

- a) Highly doubtful NHL future (grade 2 or 3-)
- b) Minor league players (grade 1)
- c) Have returned to European leagues

A similar count was made in May 2005, where the NHL signings of Europeans made prior to the 2004-2005 NHL season (the first season of the 2004-2005 IIHF-NHL Player Transfer Agreement) were evaluated.

- Of the 49 players signed, 21 went to the American Hockey League prior to the season opener and of those, eight went further down the minor league chain, and were not considered good enough for the AHL.

- Of the 49 players, 24 didn't play a single NHL game during the 2005-2006 while another 7 players were NHL "call-ups" playing 10 NHL games or less.
- Of the 49 players, only 9 participated in 60 or more games and could thus be considered as players with full NHL potential, totaling 18 percent.

The numbers from 2001-2005 indicate:

- a) **There is no need for NHL clubs to recruit 45 to 70 European players annually. This number of players cannot be used efficiently.**
- b) **European leagues cannot produce players of NHL caliber at a rate where 45 to 70 players are ready for the NHL every year.**
- c) **European clubs cannot adequately replace 45 to 70 players of similar quality for their own leagues every year, thus diminishing the quality of play in those years steadily.**

A changed regulation in the 2005-2011 NHL-NHLPA Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) regarding the recruiting of Europeans has shown early indications that signing Europeans who are not mature for the NHL could potentially increase.

Under the previous CBA, NHL clubs drafting a European player could retain his NHL rights for an unlimited number of years. Under that regulation, the NHL club had the opportunity to patiently observe the player's development and sign him when he was of NHL caliber. Under the new regulation, the NHL clubs must sign the drafted player within two years following the year the player was drafted, otherwise the club loses its NHL rights to the player.

With the new regulation, many NHL clubs sign European players in order not to lose their NHL rights to those players although aware that many of those players are still far from being of NHL caliber. Experience shows that many Europeans haven't established themselves on their European club teams during the two years following the draft, let alone ready for the NHL.

Although there is a well advised tendency of NHL clubs signing European players and a) letting them remain with their European club for one year or b) signing them, taking them over but returning them when it is obvious following the training camp that the player is not ready for the NHL, the fact remains that too many are signed prematurely and invariably sent to the minor leagues.

During the two signing periods following the new CBA (signings prior to the 2005-06 and prior to the 2006-07-season) NHL teams signed a large number of young European prospects who are fringe players and developing in their European clubs, still far away from being NHL-caliber. These unwarranted signings are one unhealthy side effect of the new CBA regulation.

## 8 THE EUROPEAN PLAYER'S PATH TO A SOLID NHL CAREER

It is obvious that many of the Europeans that become low-end 3s, 2s and 1s, are signed based on the fact that the player is drafted (especially if he is drafted in one of the first three rounds) rather than on a thorough analysis of the player's current qualities.

Example: An NHL club drafts a player when he is 18. At the time of the draft he is projected to become a solid 3+ player. For whatever reason, the player has not lived up to expectations or needs more time to develop for the NHL.

In many cases the player's current status is ignored and he is signed anyway, by virtue of his draft selection. The result is a player, who needs more work on his fundamentals and/or overall maturity, is placed with an NHL club without being prepared.

Canadian Dave King, IIHF Hall of Famer and one of the most accomplished coaches in the world, said when interviewed for this study:

"Far too many European players attempt to make the NHL when they are clearly not ready. Most NHL teams indiscriminately sign European players in hopes that a change in scenery might make a difference. In my NHL experience, teams often disregard whether the player is NHL-ready or not, they bring him over to the American Hockey League and hope for a miracle."

There are, of course, examples where the NHL club has relinquished its option to sign a draftee after the player has regressed.

In many cases, the player is ill-advised by his agent who, in his turn, is encouraged by the NHL club to sign the NHL contract despite the player's current under-prepared status.

Very often the player is persuaded that going to the minor league team is a faster way to NHL stardom than staying at home and polishing his skills. What bothers some European club officials, is that many players are tempted to take what they believe is a short-cut to the NHL. Those shortcuts very seldom work. (Obviously, the player may also be tempted to sign an NHL contract for financial reasons.)

For the many ill-advised transfers there are some encouraging examples of reason. Finnish prospect Perttu Lindgren, 18 (born August 1987) was drafted in 2005 by Dallas and was signed by the NHL club after only his first full season with Ilves of the Finnish league, where he was named "Rookie of the Year". Lindgren said in June 2006: "If I can't crack the Dallas lineup, I will return to Ilves for the 06-07-season. I am 18 and both the club and I think that it's best for me to keep developing in the Finnish league and not in the AHL."

Players who have reached a solid status in a European league seldom settle for "quick-fixes" or "shortcuts". They wait confidently until they are ready, so when they finally do sign with an NHL club they can maximize their impact, both playing and salary wise.

Winnipeg-based player agent Don Baizley has represented European players for nearly 35 years. When interviewed for this study he said:

"There is no question that significantly more NHL-success has been achieved by those of my players who delayed coming to North America until they were NHL-ready. In my experience, the players who went on to have the most success in the NHL were players who chose not to leave at the first opportunity. Saku Koivu, Jere Lehtinen, Teemu Selanne and Peter Forsberg are all clients who declined to go to the NHL at their earliest opportunity."

When analyzing the pre-NHL careers of players who have become graded 3 and above in the NHL both among the retired group of 93 players and the current group of 621 players, the following pattern emerges:

- a) The prospect is usually an impact player on the national U18 and U20 teams. (Although, many players becoming solid NHLers develop late. Most players are drafted by an NHL club after performing successfully at the IIHF World U18 Championship. At the World U20 Championship the majority of players are already drafted.)
- b) After making a debut in the domestic league (between the ages of 18 and 21), players spend two to four years with plenty of ice time in the league before signing with an NHL club.



- c) Often the successful future NHLer plays on the national senior team for one or more seasons and plays at the World Championships, where his skills are tested against world class players.

## 9 HOW LESS WOULD BE MORE – FOR EVERYONE

A healthy situation – where the NHL would not lose star appeal and European leagues would be given sufficient time to replenish their talent stock – would have the NHL sign, on average, one new European player per team (30 players). With the natural fluctuation of player movement (Europeans returning to Europe) the total of Europeans in the NHL would be reduced from roughly 30 percent (260 players) to 20 percent (180 to 190 players), with fewer players in the minors.

In the long run, this would benefit all parties involved:

1. The NHL would still recruit the best Europeans, not losing star appeal.
2. The European leagues, its teams and national team programs would not suffer a substantial, annual talent drain, with a negative trickle-down effect through the entire European league system.
3. With more time to replenish the talent stock, European leagues would be in a better position to develop the players graded 3 and above, with a legitimate chance of becoming impact NHLers.
4. Hockey Canada and USA Hockey could place more players into the NHL which would strengthen and deepen their national team player pools. That development, as well as the above point 2, would be positive for international competition.
5. Since 24 of 30 NHL teams are based in the US an increased share of US-born players<sup>9</sup> seems logical.

When analyzing the factors that produce hockey talent (player base, rink density) it is interesting to note how Canada and the USA compare with the five major European hockey countries (official IIHF numbers as submitted by the national federations of the countries):

### North America

#### Canada

Rinks: 3.000 (indoor) 11.000 (outdoor)

Registered players: 552.040

#### USA:

Rinks: 1.900 (indoor) 300 (outdoor)

Registered players: 453.299

**Total, rinks: 4.900 (indoor), 11.300 (outdoor) – total rinks: 16.200**

**Total, registered players: 1.005.339**

### Europe

#### Czech Republic

Rinks: 152 (indoor), 22 (outdoor)

Registered players: 87.130

#### Finland

Rinks: 220 (indoor), 38 (outdoor)

Registered players: 60.811

#### Russia

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<sup>9</sup> When comparing the NHL with other major leagues in sports considered as international (basketball, soccer, handball, volleyball, rugby) there is no other league where the country which hosts the overwhelming majority of teams, has such a small percentage of players produced in that country as the NHL. 18.6 percent of all NHL players are American.

Rinks: 142 (indoor), 3 (outdoor)  
Registered players: 77.202

Slovakia

Rinks: 40 (indoor), 23 (outdoor)  
Registered players: 9.209

Sweden

Rinks: 307 (indoor), 144 (outdoor)  
Registered players: 65.739

**Total, rinks: 861 (indoor), 230 (outdoor) – total rinks: 1091**

**Total, registered players: 300.091**

The North American countries outnumber the five European countries 6 to 1 in indoor rink capacity. The US has alone, more than double the rinks of the five European countries combined.

USA has more registered hockey players than all five of the European countries combined. During the 2005-2006-season, 18.6 percent (179) of the players in the NHL were US-born, meaning the five European countries, with fewer rinks and players, have more players in the NHL than the USA.

But current trends speak for continuous growth of the American contingent in the NHL, as players from the USA are joining the NHL at a faster rate than any other nation.

In the 1994-1995-season, 18 US-developed newcomers played their first season in the NHL. In 1998-1999 the number increased to 24. The development during the last three NHL seasons (compared with Czech players<sup>10</sup> in brackets):

2002-2003: 21 US-developed newcomers (8 Czechs)  
2003-2004: 32 US-developed newcomers (9 Czechs)  
2004-2005: No NHL-season  
2005-2006: 50 US-developed newcomers (11 Czechs)

The recent development of young players in the US (under USA Hockey's National Team Development Program, NTDP) had an emphatic effect on the 2006 NHL Entry Draft, where a record 10 US-born players were selected in the first round and a total of 17 former NTDP players were picked. The total US-born players selected in the 2006 draft was 59 (28 percent) far above the current share of US players in the NHL. Because of this trend in recent years, USA has become a powerhouse in both the IIHF World U20 and U18 Championships, winning gold medals at both.

With these indicators, it can be predicted that the share of North Americans – especially US-born players – can be increased in the NHL, to 20 percent Europeans and 80 percent North Americans.

## 10 NO SHORTCUTS – DEVELOPMENT IS A MATTER OF TIME

Players, who have not reached a certain maturity or talent level, need more time to develop their fundamentals. A study done by Canadian hockey coach George Kingston in 2002 (following the Salt Lake City Olympics), presented facts that fundamental skills can only be obtained in practice. The time for players to practice puck-control skills given during a game is simply not enough, as the average puck possession time of a high caliber performer during a game is roughly one minute, often less.

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<sup>10</sup> Comparison was made with the Czechs since the nation has had the largest European NHL contingent for the last six years.

“So if the superstars don’t have the puck very often, the regular players have it even less”, tells Kingston in the research. “And that would show that games do not provide players with enough ice time or puck possession time to develop fundamentals like skating, passing and puck handling.”

**Kingston says it takes playing 150 to 180 games for young hockey players to acquire one hour of quality puck possession time.**

“By looking at the skill level of an average North American player we can easily tell that Canadians and Americans do not practice the craft enough”, says Kingston. “We produce great game players, but they lack fundamental skills. The junior development in Europe is much more efficient because they have a more sound practice-to-game ratio than in North America.”

Kingston says that for players under the age of ten, you need up to five practices for one game. Over the age of ten at least 2-3 practices for every game you play. In Canada and USA youngsters often have a practice-to-game ratio that is close to one-to-one.

“Our study gives support to the theory that skill is developed through repetition. So we must try to encourage our associations and youth programs to practice more and play less if we want skilled and offensively creative players in North America”, concludes Kingston.

As Kingston emphasizes, European teams practice more than they play. When a European player is signed by an NHL-team but not considered ready for the NHL, he is sent down to the team’s AHL club and will compete in an 80-game regular season schedule, only two less than the NHL.

A European prospect choosing to go to the CHL would play a 68-72-game schedule, with extensive travel.

The top European pro leagues play 44-60 game schedules with less travel than in North America. A European junior league plays roughly 35-40 regular games per season, with moderate travel.

This difference gives what Kingston describes as a better practice-to-game ratio.

## 11 WHY THE AHL IS NOT AN IDEAL OPTION FOR EUROPEANS

One question frequently asked when conducting interviews for the study was: “Why can’t European kids develop in the minors, when the North American kids do?”

Just as George Kingston said in his study, the only way to improve skill level is in practice (repetition) and that process is more efficient if conducted in an environment with a healthy practice-to-game ratio. The advantage European leagues have is the fewer number of games, less travel (with the exception of Russia) and more practice time.

The most talented Europeans can go to an NHL-club and become impact players. Obviously, not every player can be a 5 or 4, most players dwell in the 3 category. The difference between a 3 player and a 4 or 5 player is talent and skill. An NHL-drafted player who at the age of 21 (and still playing in Europe) is a 2+ or 3- in NHL terms, can possibly work his way up to become a 3+ or possibly a 4.

A good example is Ottawa’s Daniel Alfredsson who developed into a top player late. He was a marginal player in the Swedish league at 21 and he was drafted late, at age 22 (133<sup>rd</sup> overall, 6<sup>th</sup> round). He played his first NHL

game at 23 and has, without playing one minor league game, evolved into a 5 player. Based on our study, it can be assumed that he wouldn't have been a 5-player had he been drafted at 18 and quickly sent to the minors.

To go through this phase a player needs practice, time and patience. The time that is needed to be fully developed, skill and maturity wise, is best spent in the players' home environment, which is geared more towards skill development.

**Key question: What qualities do NHL clubs hope Europeans can acquire in the minor leagues, qualities that they couldn't acquire in their European clubs?**

Virtually all European players drafted by an NHL club are recruited because of fundamental skills and a general understanding of the game. Few Europeans are drafted because of their grinding ability, penalty-killing, or to be "character/role players".

When a developing European player is sent to the minors, the necessary polishing of his fundamentals runs a risk of being neglected or lost, while the player is pressured to adopt a game which isn't his. There are a number of players, projected to become at least 3+ or even 4, signed too early and sent to the minors for an extended stay. Those who made it to the NHL, turned out 2+ or 3 players, but their potential was higher.

The result is often that a player, whose game was based on creativity and offence, is transformed into a role player with primarily defensive assignments. Yes, he made it to the NHL, but the impatience of the decision makers (and often also the player) might have deprived the fans of enjoying an exciting, creative player.

An example of this unnecessary makeover is Mikael Andersson, who played 761 NHL games during 15 NHL seasons from 1985 - 2000. He was drafted in the first round in 1984 out of the Swedish league in an era where very few Europeans were drafted high.

Andersson was named the best junior player in Sweden in 1984 and whose game was skill, speed and smartness. Buffalo signed him after only one season in the Swedish top league, at the age of 19 with too little experience. Five of his first six NHL seasons were split between the NHL and the AHL, playing in 179 minor league games. After seven seasons, he became an NHL regular, but his game was changed. A naturally gifted and creative player was now a role player and that kept him in the league for another eight seasons.

Again, there is no crystal ball. But imagine rewinding those years to see what could have happened had Andersson signed at the age of 22, instead of 19 after another three years in Sweden. He likely would have had a slightly shorter NHL career but with more ice time and goals - and a higher salary, compensating for the later NHL debut.

There are more examples with this pattern, but few players show the determination and endurance of Andersson. In most cases the player, feeling that he can't play his game, goes home.

Coincidentally as Andersson was the best junior forward in Sweden, Calle Johansson was the best junior defenseman in the country. While Andersson left with only one season's experience in the Swedish top league, Johansson stayed for more than three seasons before signing with Buffalo. Johansson is one of only six Europeans to accumulate 17 seasons and over 1000 NHL-games. Upon retirement he became a scout and is now coaching in his native Sweden.

"I had enormous use from those extra years I stayed in Sweden," said Calle when interviewed. "When I came to Buffalo, I did with a certain confidence and experience. I had a fundament to stand on. I have said it all along whenever this topic comes up - a player who has accumulated enough skill and maturity in Europe doesn't

need any 'adjustment' in the minors to the North American game. And if the player is not ready for the NHL, he should stay at home and develop until he is ready. I am pretty sure that if I had left earlier, I would have been sent to the minors and I am quite sure that my career would have turned out differently."

"When asked, I have advised NHL clubs not to recruit Europeans to the minor league team, but still many do. This hurts three fold: the European team loses a player who is under development and another player must be rushed to take his place, the player does not develop to his potential in the AHL and, finally, he takes up a spot on the AHL-team which could have gone to a Canadian or American prospect."

**If a European player is signed in good faith to play in the NHL and doesn't make the team after training camp, the NHL team should use the opportunity given in the IIHF-NHL Player Transfer Agreement to return the player to his European team. Some NHL clubs have done so already.**

Even if disagreeing with the theories why the minor leagues are not a good developmental ground for Europeans, the numbers cannot be disputed:

**In the major researched group of 621 players, 242 players with more than 100 games in the minors were found. Of those 242 players, only six were 3+ and above. In this group, no less than 213 players (88.0%) not of NHL caliber, or fringe or below average players were identified.**

(Important note: Europeans are not immune from minor league play. If a European is considered ready for the NHL, is signed and makes the team, but underperforms due to poor attitude or lackadaisical play, he must be treated like everyone else. This argument regards sending them to the minors for development.)

## 12 SEND NORTH AMERICAN PROSPECTS TO EUROPE

A North American 20-22-year old player who has left his junior or college team and still pursues a pro career has very few options other than going to the minors. The minor leagues have always been a natural base for North Americans for seasoning if the player doesn't have the qualities to take a direct step to the NHL.

But wouldn't it be a smart move to send North Americans, who are not yet ready for the NHL, to European leagues rather than to the minors?

The answer is yes.

Going to a top European league for a year or two could be beneficial for a North American player as well. An excellent example is Brian Rafalski, who left for Europe (Sweden and Finland) after four years of college, unknown and undrafted. Rafalski spent four years in Europe developing and was signed by New Jersey at the age of 26. He immediately became an impact player and played on the US Olympic teams in 2002 and 2006.

There are more examples of North American players who kick-started or revitalized their NHL careers in Europe. Randy Robitaille was a fringe NHL player for six teams in eight seasons before he went to Zurich of the Swiss league during the lockout season. Lots of ice time, many practices and virtually no travel rejuvenated Robitaille who had a career-best season with Minnesota in 2005-06.

These and other cases were due to a twist of fate. With NHL and European clubs working together by strategically assigning players, there could be more positive examples that benefit all. NHL clubs should co-operate more closely with those European clubs who have the best player development programs. These are

clubs that develop the majority of the players drafted and signed by NHL clubs. These European clubs also usually have the best professional teams.

By sending both North Americans and European prospects to Europe – in agreement with the European club – the NHL club could both compensate the European club(s) for losing their best players to the NHL as well as benefit from the “Rafalski-factor”, eventually getting back a player with improved skills and ready for the NHL. It would be a win-win situation for all.

Young NHL-signed players spending a few years in the minor leagues before moving to the NHL, would be more fundamentally sound and benefit in other areas from the experience. This group includes players like Phil Kessel, Jason Spezza, Anton Babchuk, Jani Rita, Mike Cammalleri, Patrick O’Sullivan, Zach Parise, Yan Statny, Mike Komisarek, Sean Bergenheim, Valtteri Filppula, Tomas Plekanec and Tomas Fleischmann.

One European club official, interviewed for the study, said: “We would gladly co-operate with one or several NHL clubs regarding player exchange and evaluation. With the new situation, where the NHL clubs must sign a drafted European within two years after he was drafted, they could still sign him, assign him back to our club rather than to a minor league team in North America and we would gladly submit all information about the player’s progress to the NHL club. This would be something that we would be more than willing to do if the reward is that we may keep the player for another year or two. It would benefit both clubs”.

### **13 CLICHES ABOUT THE CHL CAN NOT BE BACKED UP WITH FACTS**

Another myth to dispel, this one concerning Europeans going to the CHL, is:

*“The attraction of the CHL for Europeans is that the 68- to 72-game schedule and the grueling travel schedule – particularly in the WHL (Western Hockey League) – prepares them better for the rigors of the NHL.”<sup>11</sup>*

This theory is so widely used by those drafting Europeans to the CHL and by the agents advising them to go there that it has become a mantra. When scrutinized, it is nothing more than a cliché and a logical somersault, as far as European prospects are concerned.

The NHL and other North American leagues have continuously recruited Europeans since the early 70s because Europeans bring different elements to the game, specific to the European hockey culture. By going to the CHL at the age of 16-18, a European player adopts a different style while learning traditional Canadian hockey qualities during those formative years.

This is not necessarily wrong. But Canadians will always be better at the Canadian game than Europeans. If a European prospect wants to play in the NHL – unless he only possesses the skill of Krzysztof Oliwa – he should carefully nourish the style which makes him different and attractive in the eyes of NHL recruiters. This nourishing is best done at home.

**Why would now the CHL be considered able to prepare Europeans better for the rigors of the NHL, when the European developmental systems have developed some of the best players in the NHL and stocked the NHL with 30 percent of its player pool for the last 5-6 years?**

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<sup>11</sup> From an article written by Canadian Press after the 2006 CHL draft of Europeans, where 58 CHL clubs drafted 70 Europeans aged between 16 and 19.



The European juniors, with ambitions to play in the CHL, are placed into the three Canadian major junior leagues via the CHL Import Draft, a separate draft that the three leagues hold only for European prospects, many of whom previously have been drafted in the NHL draft.

If a European is drafted by a CHL team, the player often goes to play there. Since CHL teams have only two European selections, the team and the player agents ensure before the draft that if selected, the player will commit to play for that team. This arrangement is done not to waste a draft selection on a player who later might decline the invitation.

Just as we earlier described the negative trickle-down effect on the European development system due to the un-proportionate migration of European pro players to the NHL and the minor leagues, the exodus of junior players from Europe has a similar effect on the junior development programs, mainly in the top five European countries and especially in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Since 1997, not less than 617 European juniors were selected in the CHL draft and around 575 of them left their European junior programs. More than 500 came from the Czech Republic and Slovakia. This has had a very negative effect on the junior development program in the neighboring countries.

As much as European clubs would like fewer players in Europe to be selected in the NHL draft, the draft nevertheless is a fair reflection of the standard of the development programs in the world. Since 2000, the following number of players was selected from Czech Republic/Slovakia in the NHL draft:

2000: 25, 2001: 26, 2002: 18, 2003: 18, 2004: 21, 2005: 14, 2006<sup>12</sup>: 11

Eleven players is the lowest number of NHL drafted players from that region since 1989. Apart from a bump in 2004, there is a steady decline in draft attractive players coming from Czech and Slovak clubs.

Jan Filc, who coached Slovakia to the 2002 IIHF World Championship gold medal and now manages the youth development at the Slovak Ice Hockey Federation, said about this trend: "We are losing many talented juniors too soon. You will always find some players who benefit from the move, but most of them neither have the mental nor physical level that would justify a transfer to the CHL and many of them don't progress in their development. Considering the already narrow base of Slovak youth hockey, the loss of these young players has had a visible effect in the steadily decreasing quality of our junior leagues."

IIHF Council and Hockey Hall Fame member Murray Costello, who was instrumental in the launch of the Canadian developmental Program of Excellence in the 80s, says:

**"The goal must be to keep the development streams strong on both sides of the Atlantic by keeping the young players in their own federations and leagues until they are ready for NHL play."**

From the Canadian perspective, there is no reason why two roster spots on each CHL-teams should be given to Europeans with Hockey Canada having 441,307 youth players in its system, the most in the world.

The overwhelming majority of the European junior players who choose the CHL are not ready or not good enough to receive a pro contract with their European club at the age of 17, 18 or 19. The difference between the players who are ready and those who are not is the accumulated skill level. The player without the necessary skills should remain in an environment where the program is geared towards

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<sup>12</sup> Although it must be considered that since 2005 the NHL draft is reduced to from nine rounds to seven, the drop from 26 players in 2001 to 11 in 2006 is significant.

training and repetition of fundamental skill. To advise such player to leave that environment for one with a totally different practice-to-game ratio is counterproductive.

It is remarkable how a 72-game schedule can be regarded to be a benefit for a 16-17 year old, who must work diligently on the time-consuming development of fundamentals. This combined with a grueling travel schedule with trips conducted in buses and where 15-20-hour rides are not unusual. The time spent traveling on buses during the 72-game schedule, can be used differently if ones goal is to become a well educated and fundamentally sound player.

**The above described “attraction” to play in the CHL should “prepare European players better” for the rigors of the NHL, is not supported in the numbers that will be presented.**

The retired group of 93 European NHLers with a minimum of 400 games in the NHL, has only four players (4 percent) with a CHL-background. Of those four:

1. Esa Tikkanen returned to Finland for three years after 61 games in Canadian junior before signing with Edmonton. He does not fit the pattern of players who today chose the CHL route.
2. Pole Krzysztof Oliwa does not follow any pattern. He was a limited player and played in junior leagues below CHL, and finally made a NHL career being an enforcer, a unique feat for a European. He had 17 goals in 410 NHL games, totaling 1447 PIM.
3. Vitaly Yachmenev played 125 games in the CHL, had an unspectacular 8 year NHL career before moving back to Russia in 2003. He is the only one, on the retired group list, besides Oliwa, who gets a 2 grade (2+) despite playing more than 400 NHL games.
4. Valeri Bure is the only one among this group with a “standard” CHL career (178 games, after which he signed an NHL contract) and who became an impact player, graded 3+ on our scale.

That makes one successful European CHL alumnus out of 93.

But what was before an unusual route for a European youngster, is the norm today, especially for players from Czech Republic and Slovakia.

The main research of 621 NHL signed European players who played in the NHL or in a minor league from 2001 to 2006 (including players drafted from 1985 to 2005), shows that 11.2 percent of the “modern” players with a career graded as 3, 4 or 5, played in the CHL.

On that list of 621 players, 233 careers can be considered as average, successful or very successful in the NHL (players graded 3, 4 or 5). The remaining 388 are below average, marginal or non-impact players, graded 3-, 2 and 1.

Of the successful and fairly successful group of 233 players, 26 had prior to signing with an NHL club gone through the CHL (11.2 percent). Meaning 207 of the most successful European players in the NHL never played in the CHL. If the goal is to be a solid NHL player, why take a path with an 11 percent success rate, if the other presents 89? Of this group of 26 players, 17 are from the Czech Republic which has an overwhelming majority of European players who chose the CHL route.

Looking closer at this group of 26, only three players made an impact in the NHL (those graded 4-5): Zdeno Chara, Marian Hossa<sup>13</sup> and Peter Nedved. All three played an insignificant number of games in the CHL. Chara played 49 games, Hossa 53 and Nedved 71.

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<sup>13</sup> Hossa does not fit the pattern of a European player in the CHL. Hossa went to the CHL after completing one full pro-season in the Slovak top league where he had 44 points in 46 games for Dukla Trencin 96-97 and after playing in the 1997 IIHF World Championship. Nedved played in the CHL one season after defecting to Canada as an 18-year old from communist Czechoslovakia in 1989. Spending one season in the CHL before being drafted was his only option.



If a player is good enough to play in the NHL, he will reach the NHL regardless of what route he chooses. Of course, one season in the CHL didn't alter the predestined path of players like Chara, Hossa or Nedved. Another cliché used when trying to justify a European teenager's move to the CHL is: "By playing in North America, it will be much easier for an NHL club to scout and evaluate the player, than if he had remained in Europe."

This is, indeed, a cliché. In fact an overwhelming majority of the nearly 1000 Europeans who have played in the NHL were scouted and drafted directly from Europe. The NHL's European Scouting has over 100 scouts who cover the European talents from August through May, in junior games, pro games, all the U18 and U20 four-nation tournaments, and finally, the IIHF World U18 and U20 Championships. This is a fine-meshed netting that does not miss much. As the Espoo, Finland based Director of European Scouting Göran Stubb says: "The NHL's European vacuum cleaner sucks them up pretty good."

Can anyone name one (1) European player who missed out on a chance to be scouted by an NHL club by remaining in Europe? The simple truth is: those who are not scouted, are not good enough.

Having shown that the CHL route is irrelevant with regards to a European player's perspective of launching a successful NHL career, there are two other important issues to consider:

- a) The number of Europeans going to the CHL to get drafted compared with those who stay in Europe.
- b) Why the CHL is, mostly, an ill-advised route for European prospects?

All NHL Entry Drafts since 2000 were researched. The following are the numbers of Europeans drafted from the CHL compared with those drafted directly from their European clubs:

<u>Euro Total</u>	<u>From CHL</u>	<u>Percentage</u>	
2000: 123	16	13%	
2001: 142	19	13.5%	
2002: 124	11	8.8%	
2003: 103	10	9.7%	
2004: 97	10	10.3%	
2005: 57	9	16%	
2006: 70	6	9%	Average percentage: 11.42

This must be considered when analyzing those numbers: On a very good European junior team program there is on average one player every second year with NHL potential. Per class (22 players) there are, on average, two players with potential to be drafted and with potential to become regular European league players. Even on a good European junior team program, 19-20 players from each class will never play top-league professional hockey. There are about 70 European clubs with junior programs that can produce potential NHLers on a regular basis. The CHL managers/coaches and often the agents lure the European prospects to the CHL under the pretext that those three major junior leagues are tailor made for preparing the players for the NHL.

**The number of Europeans drafted by NHL clubs from CHL teams – when compared with the number drafted from European teams – does not support the theory that going to the CHL enhances a European player's chances of getting drafted by an NHL club.**

The main CHL-research shows how the Europeans, who are drafted in the CHL Import Draft, fare with regards to their future as potential NHLers. Six CHL Import Drafts, 1997-2002 were researched. In those four drafts, a total of 394 Europeans were selected by the 58 CHL clubs. Out of the 394, 55 players did not report, leaving 339 players who played in the CHL.



Of those, 269 (79.4 percent) never played one NHL game and out of those, 262 have returned to Europe, many already retired, or in lower-league or recreational hockey.

Of the 20.6 percent (70 players of 339) who played NHL games, 18 players are graded 3 and better or projected to be graded at least 3 or with a reasonable chance to play 400 games. This makes 18 players out of 339 (5.3 percent) having a reasonable chance to play 400 NHL games.

Of the remaining 52 players who played in the NHL, 46 are graded 1 or 2 and 26 have returned to Europe.

Out of the 18 players whose careers have “settled”, only one can be considered as an NHL star, Marian Hossa, graded 4, and it is explained on page 19 why Hossa doesn’t fit the pattern of a European who chooses the CHL route.

One of the prevailing reasons for going to the CHL is to provide more opportunity for Europeans to be drafted by NHL clubs. (This applies to the European prospects, who go to the CHL and are not previously drafted by NHL clubs. A large share of Europeans who report to the CHL clubs have already been drafted by NHL clubs.) Neither this theory carries any substance. Of the 339 who played in the CHL upon being drafted in the 1997-2002 CHL drafts, 168 (almost 50 percent) remained undrafted by NHL clubs.

**These numbers do not support the claim that going to the CHL prepares the European players better for the “rigors” of the NHL. When comparing the European players in the the CHL-system with the Europeans who are signed directly from their European clubs, the quality of the latter group is considerably higher.**

These numbers are important for CHL managers and agents to present to European prospects and parents when making the decision to go to the CHL, under the pretext that this is a viable path to an NHL career, while the opportunity to stay in their European club is rejected.

Several player agents were asked if they have conducted any research of their own, showing the success rate of the CHL-route compared with remaining at home for one to three years. None of them had.

## **14 WHY STAYING IN YOUR ENVIRONMENT MAKES BETTER SENSE**

Alexander Ovechkin is a poster child to reply the second question on page 20 (“Why is the CHL, in most cases, an ill-advised route for a European prospect?”).

When Alexander Ovechkin played in his first IIHF World U20 Championship in Halifax, Canada (in December 2002), he was asked at a press conference if he would consider playing in the CHL the next season (2003-04). Ovechkin, who at the age of 17, was already in his second year of professional club hockey with Dynamo Moscow’s Russian league team, was surprised at the question. Not wanting to go into lengthy explanations which would maybe embarrass the reporter, he simply said “no”.

What Ovechkin’s answer inferred was: Why would he, at the age of 17 and in his second season of pro hockey where he could practice against seasoned pros every day and absorb top quality training and coaching in a proven organization, go to play junior hockey the following season?

That would have been a strange decision and a step backward in his career path. And it is an illustration why the CHL is not an option for top European talent and one doesn’t have to be in the very special Ovechkin mold to have this position.

What runs like red thread with regards to all extraordinarily gifted athletes (regardless of sport) is that they always competed at an early stage against older players. Wayne Gretzky played against 12 year olds when he was 10, against 16 year olds when he was 14, and when he was 16 he played in the IIHF World U20 Championship. Special talents play against older players because the challenge develops them and helps them reach their potential.

A European prospect, graded 3, 4 or 5, usually gets his first European pro-team contract when he is 18 or 19. Special talents have a roster spot on the pro-team when they are 17 and the Ovechkins (very rare species) at least practice with the pro-team at 16. Very often a junior player, combines playing and practicing with both the club's junior team and with the pro team.

Because of the structure of European club hockey (clubs often host U16, U18 and U20 programs under the same umbrella as the pro-team) a promising player has the opportunity of gradually being integrated into the pro ranks.

The process is generally like this:

++ 16 years old: off-season (dry-land) practice with the pro team possibly combined with pre-season training camp. Season is spent with the junior team.

++ 17 years old: The player is on a schedule combining practices with both junior and pro-teams. If the player makes progress, he may be given a chance to play league games with the pro team and may be given an "apprentice contract".

++ 18 years old: If the player is still progressing, he receives a one-year contract with the pro-team. He is fully integrated with the pros, but may, since he is eligible, still play games with the junior team if his ice time is limited with the pro-team.

++ 19 years old: Either the player has progressed according to plan – and stays on the pro-team, or, he has not progressed sufficiently and gets cut or the team suggests a transfer to another team where he can get more ice team.

This is a substantial difference to North America where NHL clubs don't have junior teams within their organization and cannot freely move players between the junior and pro level during the vital four-year period when players are aged 16 to 19. In North America, you are either junior or pro.

**Why would a prospect, who given the opportunity to practice with seasoned pros – in an environment with a healthy practice-to-game ratio – leave for an environment with limited opportunity to practice with professionals, meeting only players of a similar age and where the time to practice fundamentals is limited due to a 72-game schedule and rigorous travel?**

**A question to the agents: Why are European junior players advised to go to the CHL under the pretext it is the best way to enhance the chance for a NHL-contract when there are no numbers to support this claim?**

However there are cases when a European may consider the CHL the best option.

- a) If the player is 18 or 19, and not offered an apprentice contract with a pro-team, and his practicing and playing the next season will be limited to the junior team, he has the choice of staying in his European club, or going to the CHL, the latter may be a good decision.
- b) If the player comes from a country outside the top five – where the quality of the junior program is not to a high enough standard to fulfill his potential – the CHL may be a good option.

But before choosing the CHL, players should consider other options first. If the player is not offered a contract with his European club – and is still considered a prospect, his European club, agent, and possibly the NHL club that he may be drafted by should try to transfer him to another European club with a good development program, where the pro team is not stocked with so many high-quality players. This could be a club in the same country as his “maternal” club or in another league and country.

Regarding the above scenario b) – if an ambitious and promising player comes from, for example, Slovenia, Denmark or Austria, he could look for a club with a good developmental program in a top country before jumping to the CHL. Some players who have successfully used the top leagues as a spring board for an NHL career are: Mariusz Czerkawski (Poland to Swedish league), Anze Kopitar (Slovenia to Swedish league), Darius Kasparaitis (Lithuania to the Russian league), Andrei Kostitsyn (Belarus to the Russian league), Espen Knutsen (Norway to the Swedish league).

But in both cases – if the player in scenario a) is not wanted by any other club and the player in scenario b) can not find a club in a top European league – the chances are that the player is simply not an NHL prospect and that a CHL option would be a great adventure and experience, but it will likely not lead to an NHL contract.

There are more worrying aspects of prospects leaving the Europe for the CHL, than just the fact that the route via the CHL does not enhance a European player’s chance of becoming a successful NHL player.

A 17-year old player who leaves his European club also quits school (at the secondary school level) and usually does not graduate. KG Stoppel is the manager of junior development at Djurgarden Stockholm, a club known for high-quality youth development that has seen 33 of their best players get drafted and/or signed by NHL clubs.

“This is becoming more and more a major problem that has a potential to disrupt the natural flow of our developmental system. We, and other European clubs, have shown that we can develop players who, if good enough, can go straight to an NHL club and become impact players. And we don’t mind that. But what we mind is when a 17-year old player, with only one year’s experience of junior hockey in Sweden with so much more to learn, leaves for the CHL, believing it is a faster way to an NHL contract. They are made to believe, primarily by their agents and by the CHL clubs that draft them, that this is the right way to go, although there are no numbers that support this. This sadly represents the general impatience that is prevalent in our society today, that everything must be done fast, that you don’t have to pay your full dues anywhere and where taking shortcuts has become the new way of life. To go to the CHL at 17, when you are part of a program which keeps you very close to our club’s pro team, is not a step forward. It’s a step sideways. Very often we see a tendency among those players that their self image is somewhat imprecise. By taking the CHL option they take an external path instead of thoroughly and honestly analyzing their shortcomings. They simply believe that you can avoid some of the necessary steps by going to the CHL.”

In several of the cases, the CHL route is not only a sideways step, it’s a step backwards. Many of the players return as disillusioned and lesser players after one or more years in the CHL. Believing that the CHL is just next-door to the NHL, players realize very soon that this is not the case, despite the fact that the CHL clubs have NHL-like websites, they play in nice arenas often are filled to capacity, their picture appears in a nice media guide and the games are covered by extensively by local media.

And often, and this is confirmed by the youth managers spoken to for this study, upon coming back to Europe the player often chooses to go to another club rather than returning to his own, confirming the tendencies of the non-confrontational behavior he showed when leaving in the first place.

As much as the data shows that there are far better options for 17- and 18-year old European prospects who, are part of a good European development program and want to develop into 3, 4 or 5 graded NHL players than going to the CHL, the following must in all fairness be pointed out:

++ The CHL is not being downplayed as a league where players can either develop into an NHL player or have the CHL as a one-stop-station before making the final step to the NHL, a step that a player would have made regardless of where that year was spent (examples: Marian Hossa, Marek Svatos, Andrej Meszaros). It's in the CHL that skilled players like Wayne Gretzky, Steve Yzerman, Vincent Lecavalier and Joe Sakic have developed and this is the league from where most of the recent IIHF World U20 champions play. But this is also virtually the only route a Canadian 16-17 year old player has open. For several reasons – which the numbers support – the CHL is not the best option for a talented European.

++ A year or two in the CHL can be a wonderful life experience for a European player. He can learn a new culture and language, he can mature as a human being and maybe even get to know life-long friends. And he can have the fondest time of his life there. But this study is from a pure a hockey perspective and from that point of view the CHL is not the best option for a European with NHL dreams.

One final year in the CHL, before making a predestined step to the NHL, can be justified for “cultural” reasons, learning a new language, new way of life, customs, etc. It was the reason why Slovak rookie Andrej Meszaros played the 2004-05-season in the CHL, before signing with the Ottawa Senators for the 2005-06-season.

What cannot be disregarded though is that the precocious and extremely gifted Meszaros played in the Slovak professional league (Dukla Trencin) for two years at the ages of 17 and 18 while learning his basic fundamentals before heading for the CHL. It can be speculated that a third year with seasoned pros would have made the defenseman an even better NHLer than one year in a junior league.

In Hockey Canada's development model adopted in 2005, it was recommended that the number of Europeans CHL teams can carry be reduced from two to one starting in the 2007-08-season. This is a well advised recommendation, but it shouldn't stop with one. There is no reason why two spots on each of the 58 CHL teams should be reserved for Europeans, while so many Canadians eagerly vie for a CHL-team roster spot.

## 15 AUTHORS NOTE

The farthest thing in my mind, when conducting this study, was to hint at the stereotype, and mostly European hockey prejudice, that “Europeans are skilled, while North Americans are unskilled but tough.” Some may interpret this study as having this as a hidden agenda. I have followed international hockey very closely since the historic 1972 Summit Series between Canada and Soviet Union and there is no doubt that the level of fundamental skill among both Canadians and Americans has increased dramatically during the era of “modern hockey”.

In Canada, it was achieved mainly through the Program of Excellence launched in the 1980s. Today's teams representing Canada in IIHF championships on all levels and in the Olympics rely on skill and speed as much as on traditional Canadian “intangibles”, those which European teams always will be envious of, because they can't be taught.

In the United States, the vastly improved college program and USA Hockey's National Team Development Program (NTDP) have substantially increased the skill level among US players, to the degree where USA Hockey's national teams are potential medal winners in any international tournament. This was not the case 10-15 years ago.



Having said this, and referring to other studies I have read about youth development in other team sports, the prevailing insight is that young athletes become as successful as their God given talents allow them to become if they develop as long as they can in their natural environment where the emphasis is on development and patient repetition rather than on professional-like competition. By staying in ones natural environment I don't mean that a 16- or 17-year old player can't move from Brantford to Sault Ste. Marie. It's the moves between Plzen, Czech Republic and Kamloops, British Columbia that are difficult and unnecessary.

One aspect rarely raised in this ongoing discussion is this: one of the most exciting features about international hockey is the difference in styles between the nations and the hockey schools they represent. Canadians have their way of playing, while the Americans, although from virtually the same hockey culture, play slightly different. The Russians have their characteristics, the Swedes have their special traits, the Czechs are known for their attributes which actually differ from their brethren, the Slovaks. And there is an unmistakable distinction to the Finnish way of playing.

If many young players from the dominating hockey countries go through the same program during their formative years, many of the national characteristics will get lost. We run a risk of producing players who will all molded into the same form. This is a development we should avoid.

When interviewing the people for the purpose of the study, I realized that every group involved in this has their own priorities and objectives. The NHL's job is to make sure that 970 roster on their 30 teams spots are filled with players. The European scouts want to be appreciated by their club's manager by advising about as many capable European players as possible. The agents live from the percentage they get off the contracts their clients sign. The European club officials would like to keep all their players for as long as they possibly can to win national championships. The players pursue their dreams, to play at the highest possible level and maximize their commercial value.

In all of this there must somewhere be an element of trying to think what is good for the global development of this superior game of ours. And, of course, what is best for the future of the developing players.

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