

Chalk Talk

Making the Grade

Commitment and Sacrifice is Key to Pursuing a Hockey Career



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I would say 90% of the young men and women playing competitive hockey between the ages of fourteen and twenty have had dreams and aspirations of either playing Major Junior hockey or playing in the N.C.A.A. with some

form of scholarship. For most of these kids this is a very difficult dream to attain. Players of today have a lot of options and distractions. Their lives are fast paced and time management is an essential skill. The commitment by not only the player, but also the entire family is huge. Today's player needs a support system consisting of money, a driver, and time with sacrifice being an imperative family trait. This is why I say these are difficult dreams for most kids; they do not have the support system and have a difficult time making sacrifices. I also understand that these exceptional athletes are only kids and should enjoy their youth as long as possible. But, with the rewards of being drafted, accepting a scholarship, playing in front of big crowds, and hopefully one day signing a pro contract with all the associated benefits, more and more players and families are making the sacrifices and commitments to being a hockey player.

In the past, I was fortunate enough to have been an assistant coach at the N.C.A.A. level with The University of Alabama in Huntsville, which is a division one program. In helping with recruiting, I saw that there were exceptional young student athletes competing for scholarship opportunities from all over the globe. Competition is very tough. Also, a player's window of opportunity is very short. Most players have 2-3 years to display their talents to achieve their goals. In Major Junior, a player has two years or roughly 140 games to position himself for the draft, or in Junior A one has two or three years or roughly 150 games to impress an academic institution. With the potential investment from Junior

teams and American universities being anywhere from \$5,000-\$30,000 per year, the young person has to be much more than just a hockey player. In today's world, given the economics, the young person has to be a total package. One has to be comfortable and prominent in all life situations. By situations, I mean that the player has to be above average: on the ice, in the classroom, (in the N.C.A.A. hockey players are student-athletes, with the emphasis on student first, in the community, (Does this person better the environment?), and in society, (Does this person have any problems with the law or authorities?). These are all situations in which one must excel if they wish to achieve their goals. I know when I reported to the Head Coach after scouting and speaking with a player, we would talk about several other factors before we spoke about hockey. The Coach would want to know in this order: How was the player's initial greeting, did he look you in the eye when shaking hands? How was his appearance, was he well groomed? What did his coach have to say about him? What are his grade averages and S.A.T. score? (An entrance exam to U.S. universities) and finally, how did he play? This is also an example of why a player with aspirations has to be well rounded and comfortable in all situations.

One such player who has made the commitment in his athletic, academic, and social life to pursue an athletic scholarship is named Jeremy Burgess. Jeremy is currently the captain of The Wexford Raiders Jr. A Club and playing in his second season in the O.P.J.H.L. I am going to use Jeremy's daily schedule as an

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example of a student-athlete trying to attain a scholarship. As a result of his commitment, dedication, and sacrifice Jeremy is currently speaking with several top ranked American academic institutions in the hopes of one day attending on a hockey scholarship. Jeremy is one of the young athletes who realizes the importance of education in determining one's future. This reflects itself in his schedule; as he is involved in academics between 38-45 hours a week by attending university prep courses, school meetings, homework and assignments. On top of his studies, Jeremy also makes time to be a member on Student Council and serves as President of the Boy's Athletic Association. His interest and commitment in academics is evident in his 92% average and impressive score of 1310 on his S.A.T.

Jeremy is also an exceptional athlete who commits 20-30 hours a week to travel and playing hockey. This works out to 4-5 hours a day

dedicated to hockey alone. Evident by his schedule, he has very limited time for a social life. This is where the sacrifices are being made to follow a dream. Because most games are on Friday and Sunday evenings, Saturday night is his only time to relax and socialize. Compared to his peers, Jeremy has not been to a school dance or function because of his commitments to hockey. With Saturday being the night before a game, he would have to be home at a decent hour for curfew therefore giving up his whole weekend. There are also little sacrifices along the way, such as junk food. With such a hectic schedule diet becomes a factor in one's success. For the present, Jeremy has given up late nights of eating pizza and wings in order to maintain his health.

Hopefully by using Jeremy's schedule as a guide, one can see the commitment and sacrifice a player and their families must make if they want a chance to succeed. As a young player coming through the

system, one has to make a conscientious decision whether or not to commit to playing at the next level. Do you and your family want to commit to being a player? Are you willing to sacrifice your weekends? Can you give up your social life? Are you dedicated when your coach and parents are not around? Can you alter your diet and exercise? Are you good at everything in life? When you can answer these questions and commit to your answers you will have a better chance at success and moving to the next level. If you cannot make these sacrifices and commitments, the days of showing up early to practice to show your dedication are long gone.

Shane Bowler is president of the Hockey Institute in Toronto and currently the head coach of the Wexford Raiders Jr. A team of the O.P.J.H.L. He was formerly an All American hockey player and assistant coach at the University of Alabama in the mid 90's.