

In Canada, the Cost of Youth Hockey Benches the Next Generation

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Colorado Avalanche defenseman Samuel Girard was a teenager when his parents sat him and his older brother Jérémy down in their Roberval, Quebec, home for an uncomfortable conversation that would dramatically alter their lives.

The Girard family could afford to enroll only one of its sons in elite hockey for that year. Samuel's father, Tony, drives forklifts at a nearby forest products factory; his mother, Guylaine, is a family day care educator.

At the time, Samuel and Jérémy were at a level for players aged 15 to 17 eligible for major junior leagues. Facing registration fees, equipment, travel and payments to billet families — a necessity since the Girards lived about an hour and a half drive away from the closest team — forced the family to make a choice: they could only afford for one son to keep playing. Jérémy, aware of his younger brother's potential, hung up his skates while Samuel continued to pursue the sport in Canada's junior hockey system.

Samuel went on to get drafted by the Nashville Predators in 2016, at age 18. He was traded to the Avalanche in 2017 and, this past summer, signed a contract extension that will pay him \$35 million over seven seasons.

"Let's not kid ourselves, hockey's expensive," Girard said. "My parents needed help."

Those conversations are happening more frequently in Canadian households as the price of ice hockey is forcing many parents to choose different sports for their boys.

"If I were starting out to play hockey now, my parents wouldn't have been able to afford to put me in the sport, that's just the reality of it," said Joe Thornton, a 23-year N.H.L. veteran who grew up in St. Thomas, Ontario.



For Samuel Girard, now a defenseman for the Colorado Avalanche, playing junior hockey was a tough choice for his family. “Let’s not kid ourselves, hockey’s expensive,” Girard said. “My parents needed help.” Jeffrey T. Barnes/Associated Press

“It’s a pricey sport to get into, that’s for sure. I don’t know how my parents did it but I always had new skates every year. We had wood sticks and those would cost \$12. Now it’s \$100 for a composite stick. It’s just going up,” Thornton said.

Devils forward Wayne Simmonds also knows firsthand how expensive minor hockey can be.

The 31-year-old grew up in Scarborough, a section of Toronto where the median household income was roughly 63,000 Canadian dollars (about \$48,000) in 2015, according to city data. His family organized barbecues, among other efforts, to help pay for his hockey dreams.

“The cost is extremely high and it’s not really manageable for most working-class families to afford to put their kids in hockey,” he said. “Never mind if they had two kids or three kids that wanted to play the sport.”

A 2019 Scotiabank Hockey Club and FlipGive survey of Canadian parents found that 47 percent spent, on average, between 500 and 1,000 Canadian dollars (between \$380 and \$760) on hockey equipment every season. WinterGreen Research, a Boston-based sports research organization, found that the average Canadian family spends 1,700 Canadian dollars (about \$1,300) a year on equipment, registration, tournaments, and other fees. Those costs are only ballooning as technical advances in gear force elite players to restock year after year.

“I couldn’t afford the high-end, thousand dollar skates for a few years and people would make fun of me about them,” said Akim Aliu, who has played in the N.H.L., American Hockey League and a number of European leagues, during his 12-year professional career. “It’s the same with sticks. Obviously there’s the \$250, \$300 sticks that we couldn’t afford at the beginning, so we were using wooden sticks while everyone else was using composite sticks.”

Those costs have come under increased consideration as minor hockey registration totals among boys decreased throughout the country for the fourth consecutive year, according to a 2018-19 report by Hockey Canada, the country's governing body over the sport's development. The number of boys registered to play in Canada has dropped by 2 percent over the past four seasons. Participation among girls jumped almost 18 percent in the same span.

As the Toronto Raptors continue their quest to repeat as N.B.A. champions and Canadian-born tennis phenoms like Bianca Andreescu build their careers, Canadians are increasingly becoming enamored with other sports. In Ontario, registration for youth basketball increased by more than 6 percent from 2017-18 to 2018-19, and Tennis Canada reported a 32 percent increase from 2016 to 2018 of children under 12 who played at least once a week during an eight-week period.

But among the leagues that feed the professional ranks, cost signals elite status. Parents hoping to propel their boys' professional careers are investing more money on training, seeking an edge in the competition for college roster spots and draft positioning. Hockey camps, power-skating classes and preparatory schools with elite hockey programs — like Hill Academy and the Canadian International Hockey Academy, both in Ontario — have risen in popularity. Current N.H.L. stars like Sidney Crosby, Connor McDavid, and Mitchell Marner, among others, attended such academies, where tuition can cost as much as \$40,000 annually.

Ryan Compton, an economics professor at the University of Manitoba and a hockey dad himself, believes that the reward in Canada for progressing to the next level is greater in hockey than in other sports — a theory he associates with the tournament theory. Developed by the American economists Edward Lazear and Sherwin Rosen, the model stipulates that awards are based on relative rank rather than overall output. The theory predicts that participants — in this case minor hockey players — have a tendency to overspend to outdo their opponents, which might mean paying for hundreds of hours on the ice to practice shooting.

“When you see that your child is playing with a peer group and you hear about all the other things they are doing on the side, it's easy to feel, ‘If I don't do the same, my child is not going to continue in the next level,’” Compton said.

In response to concerns about cost, some hockey associations have waived registration fees for new players. Hockey Canada and its equipment partner, Bauer, have also added introductory programs where children get equipment at reduced prices or for free. The N.H.L., through its newly expanded Learn To Play program, provides opportunities for kids in cities around the league to experience the sport. Though there is a participation fee of about \$170, equipment is provided.

“We make sure that there's equipment exchange programs available, we've gotten N.H.L. clubs involved,” said Rob Knesaurek, a league vice president in charge of developing youth hockey. The league, he said, also subsidizes renting ice time.

“It's all about capturing that youthful enthusiasm so that we can sustain it for a long time,” said Tom Renney, Hockey Canada's chief executive and a former Rangers head coach.

Players have stepped up as well, including Crosby, who donated 87 sets of hockey equipment for black, Indigenous and immigrant communities in his native Nova Scotia.

These efforts come as hockey faces criticism about its lack of diversity and a pattern of racial incidents. In November, Calgary Flames head coach Bill Peters was fired after it was revealed he used a racial slur toward a black player in 2009. A.H.L. defenseman Brandon Manning was suspended five games for using a racial

slur during a game on this year's Martin Luther King Jr. Day. The percentage of the league's players who are from minority groups has remained stagnant over the past 20 years at roughly 5 percent. The N.H.L. has conceded that "hockey has the perception in some circles as being 'not for some' and 'only for others,'" and that it needs to adapt to North America's changing demographics.

"Culture trumps cost," said Kim Davis, an N.H.L. executive responsible for social impact initiatives. "If we're able to set the right culture the cost won't be as prohibitive as it appears to be."

In Toronto, Canada's largest city, almost half of the population was born outside of Canada. The city is home to Hockey 4 Youth, a grass-roots organization partnered with the Toronto Maple Leafs that is attempting to foster social inclusion by helping new Canadians play the game.

"When you get to a certain point, when you are 8 or 9, when players start to separate themselves on skill level, that's when the difficulty comes in because now there's an investment in dollars," said Moezine Hasham, the group's director. Despite the initiatives by the sport's governing bodies, N.H.L. teams, and sport-focused charities, there is still concern that ice hockey will remain off-limits to much of the Canadian population because of its price tag.

"It's a crime it's that expensive but I know there are programs out there and there are a lot of hockey guys that give back to their communities and try to get kids on the game of hockey so they can enjoy it," Simmonds said.

"Obviously I believe it's the best game in the world but I don't think a lot of people are able to experience it because of the costs."