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DEVELOPING SITUATION

College hockey offers players an ideal environment to improve

By Neil Koepke

When John-Michael Liles started his college hockey career at Michigan State University in 1999, very few scouts, if any, had the 5-foot-9, 180-pounder projected to be a top-level NHL defenseman.

That didn't matter to Liles, who was simply eager to develop his skills in college and see where it took him in the game, while earning a degree to see where it took him in life.

Liles took advantage of college hockey's player development system, increased his skill and strength over four years, and it led him to a distinguished career in the NHL as an offensively-gifted defenseman.

After seven years with the Colorado Avalanche, Liles, 31, is in his first season with the Toronto Maple Leafs. Not bad for a guy who was a fifth-round pick in the 2000 NHL Entry Draft.

Practicing four days a week and playing just two games, along with time spent on strength and conditioning, was the perfect combination for Liles to develop his skills and to mature into an NHL-ready player.

"With so many practices, you had time to learn the game and improve all your skills," said Liles, who's from Zionsville, Ind. "College coaches are great in helping you develop and the support staff – strength coaches, trainers, equipment staff and team doctors – plays a big role, too."

Recent studies in Canada and the U.S. urge a better ratio of practice time to games played, especially at the youth level. And many stress that skill development for junior and college hockey is enhanced when teams practice more and play fewer games.

"Hockey is a late specialization sport," said Bob Mancini, a regional manager with USA Hockey's American Development Model program. "A very small percentage of players are ready for the NHL at 18 and even at 20."

"You don't necessarily increase your skill in games. You improve hockey sense and awareness. But you increase skills in practice."

Mancini, who coached at Ferris State and Michigan Tech and also in the OHL, said

the key for colleges is conducting quality, intense practices.

"The very best players in the NHL handle the puck for a minute per game. Practices with lots of drills, touches and involvement are important," he said.

Most former college players who made it to the NHL say they benefited by the

"College coaches are great in helping you develop," Michigan State alum JOHN-MICHAEL LILES said, "and the support staff – strength coaches, trainers, equipment staff and team doctors – plays a big role, too."



outstanding resources available to college athletes, both athletic and academic.

"I was completely raw when I went to Western (Michigan). I never lifted weights. But everything from my toes to my head got stronger and bigger and better each year," said Keith Jones, who played in the NHL for eight seasons and is now a TV analyst with the Philadelphia Flyers and NBC Sports Network.

Ryan Malone, who played at St. Cloud State and now a member of the Tampa Bay Lightning, said he took advantage of practice-to-game ratio and improved his skill level and conditioning.

"I had that natural frame but I was 6-foot-2 and 180 (pounds) and needed to get stronger if I was going to make the NHL," he said. "I really liked the conditioning program at St. Cloud and was confident that with college schedule the way it was, mostly playing on weekends, I'd have plenty of time to focus on conditioning."

Former Denver standout center Joe Colborne was impressed with the coaching and level of support during his two years in college. Colborne, 20, a top Toronto Maple Leafs prospect, expects more and more college players to make an impact in the NHL.

"I think that comes down to the level of coaching, the high level of play and the opportunity to get bigger and stronger by playing fewer games," Colborne said.

Notre Dame head coach Jeff Jackson believes that the day-to-day structure and responsibilities needed to be a college student help players when they arrive for practice or workouts.

"That sense of responsibility and accountability has an impact when they get to the rink. They're used to a routine and ready to focus on practice," said Jackson, who has coached in college for 13 seasons and also was a head coach in the OHL and an assistant in the NHL.

Jackson says a 60- to 80-game schedule at any level cuts into practice time and leads to weariness and bad habits.

"You're cutting skill development 75 percent, and in situations where you play three games in three nights, or two in three, the second game is at a lower level than the first and the third game is where players pick up bad habits," he said.

"College level practices are done at a high level and outside a player's comfort zone," Jackson added, "and that accelerates skill development and the ability to comprehend the game." ■

HIGHEST HONORS

College hockey's presence felt among the very best of the NHL

At times during the NHL's annual Las Vegas Awards Show the past few seasons, it's felt like some college hockey pep bands would be more fitting than the musical acts brought in from elsewhere on the Vegas strip.

Former college hockey players walked away with six major trophies in June:

- Vermont graduate **Tim Thomas** claimed both the Vezina Trophy and the Conn Smythe Trophy as the league's top goaltender and playoff MVP, respectively
- Former Ohio State star **Ryan Kesler** won the Frank Selke Trophy as the top defensive forward, while adding 41 goals offensively
- Thomas's Catamount teammate **Martin St. Louis** earned the Lady Byng Trophy as the game's most gentlemanly player
- **Doug Weight**, an All-American at Lake Superior State, won the King Clancy Memorial Trophy for leadership on and off the ice
- Bowling Green graduate **Dan Bylsma** won the Jack Adams Award as the league's coach of the year

"It's great to see our college hockey alumni not only reaching the NHL, but excelling there," College Hockey, Inc. Executive Director Paul Kelly said. "College hockey continues to produce some of the most talented hockey players in the world."

These six thank-you speeches hardly

amounted to a one-year wonder for college hockey. In fact, Thomas's Vezina win marked the third straight year an NCAA netminder won the award (Ryan Miller and Thomas, again, previously). His Conn Smythe Trophy came on the heels of Jonathan Toews claiming playoff MVP honors in 2009-10.

St. Louis won the Lady Byng for the second time in as many years, and he's not far



TIM THOMAS became the second former collegian in as many years to win the Conn Smythe Trophy, following Jonathan Toews.

removed from his 2004 Hart Trophy as the league's MVP. Even Bylsma's coach of the year honor was a repeat for former college hockey players; the year before former North

Dakota Fighting Sioux defenseman Dave Tippett won the Jack Adams for his work with the Phoenix Coyotes.

Also in 2010 college hockey was represented by the best of the best at the Olympics in Vancouver, where the top goalie (Miller), forward (Toews) and defenseman (Brian Rafalski) as chosen by the media were all former college players.

This success comes at a time where the pipeline of talent flowing from the NCAA ranks to the NHL is stronger than ever. A full 30% of NHLers in 2010-11 had college hockey backgrounds, with 294 former college players hitting the ice during the course of the year. That represents a growth of 34.4% over 10 years and a 9% rise from the year before.

"It's a reflection of college hockey in general being so much stronger," said Tampa Bay Lightning forward and Harvard alum Dominic Moore. "The quality of players has gotten better and the powers that be are not afraid to give these players a chance. We have 11 college guys on our team right now; 10 years ago you'd never see that happen."

College hockey is scouted more thoroughly than ever before, thanks in part to Bylsma and Tippett's colleagues in front offices around the NHL. More than 150 former college players work in hockey operations at the NHL level, including nine general managers and several assistant GMs or directors of scouting. ■

FUTURE STARS

More than 200 current college players have been drafted by NHL teams, and many more could sign as free agents. Here are five current college players – one from each conference – who could grab the spotlight at the next level:

ANDREW BLAZEK, Robert Morris

Like Toronto rookie Jake Gardiner (who played at Wisconsin), Blazek is a former forward who has transitioned to defense. The 6'1" junior is a Pittsburgh native who took part in the Penguins' development camp this past summer.

BRIAN DUMOULIN, Boston College

Dumoulin is a polished two-way defenseman who put off signing with the Carolina Hurricanes to return to BC for his junior season. The 6'4", 210-pounder was a first-team All-American as a sophomore and won a bronze medal at the World Junior Championship.

BRIAN O'NEILL, Yale

O'Neill, a finalist for ECAC Hockey's player of the year honor last season, is one of the most dynamic offensive players in college hockey. Yale's captain this season, he has led the team in scoring each of the last two years and had a point in all but four games last year. The undrafted 23-year-old is an NHL free agent.

JADEN SCHWARTZ, Colorado College

A first-round draft choice of the St. Louis Blues in 2010, Schwartz has averaged better than a point and a half per game during his year-plus career as a Tiger. Last March, in seven WCHA and NCAA playoff games, the crafty left winger from Wilcox, Saskatchewan, scored four goals and added 10 assists.

REILLY SMITH, Miami

A Dallas Stars prospect, Smith is the focal point of the RedHawks attack this year after the graduation of Phoenix Coyotes prospect Andy Miele and Boston Bruins prospect Carter Camper. The Mimico, Ontario, native is the top returning goal scorer in the nation.



PLAYING ON THE BIG STAGE

From NHL arenas to MLB parks, college hockey offers world-class exposure

By Rachel Lenzi

Matt Mangene relishes the thought of not only walking into Fenway Park on a winter day, but lacing up his skates to play in a college hockey game on a frozen rink inside one of baseball's most hallowed cathedrals.

Mangene and his teammates at the University of Maine will get that chance Jan. 7, when the Black Bears face New Hampshire in "Frozen Fenway 2012," a Hockey East doubleheader at Fenway Park that will also pit Massachusetts against Vermont.

"This is something that's very surprising to happen, but it's great to get this opportunity," said Mangene, a junior defenseman for the Black Bears. "We can't wait to get down to Boston and walk around and see the history that's inside of the park. And then we get to play outdoors."

Mangene's expectations for Frozen Fenway 2012 exhibit a factor that's helping the growth of college hockey. Each season, the game is featured in bigger and more unique venues in front of larger crowds.

This season, eight National Hockey League arenas and two Major League Baseball stadiums will host Division I college hockey games during the regular season, postseason and conference and national tournaments. Among those sites: Cleveland's Progressive Field, Pittsburgh's CONSOL Energy Center, Detroit's Joe Louis Arena and St. Paul's Xcel Energy Center.

Tampa's St. Pete Times Forum will host the 2012 Frozen Four in April and New York's Madison Square Garden will host "Red Hot Hockey" on Nov. 26, the third matchup between Cornell and Boston University at the newly renovated facility.

"I know some of the Long Island kids at BU, and they can't wait to play at the

Garden," said Mangene, who grew up on Long Island. "They grew up going to Rangers games. Kids are going to the most famous arena in the world. They may have never thought they would have gotten to play in this kind of game in their lifetime."

Exposure for college hockey continues, not just in major-league facilities but also on network television.

On Nov. 2, NBC Sports Group announced it will carry 16 live college hock-

For the second time in three years Boston University and Cornell travel to New York for a sold-out game at "the world's most famous arena."



ey games and the Hockey East tournament this season, starting with Boston University at Notre Dame at 7 p.m. (EST), Dec. 31 on VERSUS.

NBC/Versus will join CBS College Sports and ESPN as national television outlets that carry college hockey, in addition to numerous regional television outlets.

"One thing that has exploded in college hockey is the television coverage," Dave

Starman, a broadcaster with CBS College Sports, told College Hockey, Inc. earlier this year. "I think when a young player makes a decision about where to play, you have to think about the fact that their games are not just being seen by the people in the building, they are being seen by people across North America because of the exposure college hockey gets on television."

Paul Karpowich, a senior goalie at Clarkson, believes that televising college hockey games on national network television has the potential to create a larger audience.

"It's going to be reaching a lot more homes, instead of it being on regional networks," Karpowich said. "All of the local networks here cover us and the locals get them, but it seems like no one else gets them unless there's an internet feed. It's almost like football, how televised games draw in new fans. Hopefully college hockey will have that same effect."

Karpowich and the Golden Knights will face North Dakota on Jan. 7 at the MTS Centre in Winnipeg, home of the NHL's Winnipeg Jets.

"I've never played in an NHL rink before, so getting an opportunity to play in one means a lot, especially being so close to home," said Karpowich, who was born and raised in Thunder Bay, Ontario.

Mangene agrees, and believes the trend of college hockey games at major-league venues should continue. And, he said, one of college hockey's fiercest rivalries could help the game's visibility.

"If you've never known about Maine-UNH rivalry and you live in Boston, you buy a ticket, you come to the game and you get to see how inspiring and what a matchup it is," Mangene said. "It could get better and better. I don't see a downside. It brings a better crowd and brings better fans into it." ■

COLLEGE HOCKEY GAMES AT NHL, MLB VENUES

Nov. 26	Cornell vs. Boston University , Madison Square Garden, New York City	Jan. 7	Clarkson vs. North Dakota , MTS Centre, Winnipeg
Dec. 2-3	Nebraska-Omaha vs. Alabama Huntsville , Bridgestone Arena, Nashville, Tenn.	Jan. 14	Boston College vs. Northeastern , Fenway Park, Boston
Dec. 29-30	Great Lakes Invitational (Michigan, Boston College, Michigan State, Michigan Tech), Joe Louis Arena, Detroit	Jan. 15	Michigan vs. Ohio State , Progressive Field, Cleveland
Dec. 30	Ohio State vs. Robert Morris , CONSOL Energy Center, Pittsburgh	Feb. 6/13	Beanpot Tournament (Boston College, Boston University, Harvard, Northeastern), TD Garden, Boston
Jan. 7	Frozen Fenway , Vermont vs. Massachusetts, 4 p.m., and New Hampshire vs. Maine, Fenway Park, Boston	March 15-17	WCHA "Final Five," Xcel Energy Center, St. Paul, Minn.
		March 16-17	Hockey East semifinals and championship , TD Garden, Boston
		March 17-18	CCHA semifinals and championship , Joe Louis Arena, Detroit
		March 24-25	NCAA West Regional , Xcel Energy Center, St. Paul, Minn.
		April 5/7	NCAA Frozen Four , St. Pete Times Forum, Tampa

COLLEGE HOCKEY ON TV

More than 125 NCAA hockey games are available to viewers nationwide, including many in Canada. Visit collegehockeyinc.com/tv-schedule for a complete list.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

College hockey players have rigorous on- and off-ice schedules

In an effort to chart the typical day for a Division I men's hockey player, we talked to five seniors from across the country — each of them the captain of their team and a candidate for the 2012 Lowe's Senior Class Award. They shared pieces of their typical days with us to put together this "day in the life" of a college hockey player.

JACK CONNOLLY, Minnesota Duluth It's pretty jam-packed. I'll get up and get some breakfast at home. We try to schedule classes in the morning since we have practice in the afternoon. You carry four or five classes, between 12 and 15 credits, and they'll meet either two or three times a week.

TOMMY CROSS, Boston College We have walk-in lifts in the morning, where you can go in and do a workout before or between classes. Two walk-in lifts each week are mandatory and a third is optional. We also have ice available in the morning, so on Mondays and Wednesdays, when I have a class at 9 and another at 11 a.m., I may get on the ice for a half hour in between to work on skills or skating.

CHRIS HALTIGIN, RIT I finished class around noon, so I went home and did some homework. I have an exam in my class tonight so I needed to do some studying. Then I got a nap in from about 2-3 p.m. before I came to the rink.

KEIR ROSS, Cornell If I have time between classes or before practice I'll go to the library and get some work done before practice comes around. I don't really have any downtime, so I have to take advantage of those times when I can.

SEAN DUDDY, Ohio State We're doing it a little differently this year — we have practice in the morning. So you get up and get to the rink to stretch by 7:30 a.m. and you schedule your classes for the afternoon. It's worked out great.



Jack Connolly's work on the ice and in the classroom culminated with the NCAA title in 2010-11.

RIT's Chris Haltigin is a two-year captain and biomedical sciences major from Oakville, Ontario.



You have to learn to go to bed a little earlier at night but I feel fresher during the day.

ON GAMEDAY

Games, typically on Friday and Saturday, offer a break from the weekday routine. Here's a bit about how things change:

ROSS I love gameday routine. You look forward to that all week. I will get up, get some breakfast and go to my 10:10 a.m. class before gameday skate.

CONNOLLY We usually have our pregame skate around noon for 30-60 minutes. About half the team will have class Friday mornings, so not everyone will be there. After that we go to Blackwoods for our pregame meal around 1 or 1:30 p.m. Then it's back home for a pregame nap and I'll try to

leave for the rink between 4:30 and 4:45 p.m. for a 7 p.m. game.

HALTIGIN On the road you watch movies, watch TV, hang out with your teammates. It's also a chance to do as much homework as you can. A lot of our work gets submitted online, and our video coach sets up wifi on the bus so guys can work, but if you get too many people on there it gets pretty slow.

CROSS A lot of our trips are short bus rides. On those the bus is pretty quiet and focused, guys keep to themselves and prepare for the game.

CROSS Today we spent an hour at a local high school spending time with some special-needs kids, just interacting with them and hopefully brightening their day. Yesterday a bunch of us went to an elementary school nearby to play floor hockey. We try to do stuff like that as much as we can.

CONNOLLY I try to get to the rink by 1:30 or 2 p.m. We won't practice until 3 p.m., but during the season we lift or work out beforehand on either Mondays and Tuesdays or Mondays and Wednesdays. By Thursday it's more of a chance to get on the ice and get ready for the weekend.

CROSS Early in the week are busier days. The theme both at the rink and academically is to get your schoolwork and off-ice work done early in the week so you can focus on playing Fridays and Saturdays. Freshmen have mandatory study hall for three hours each week, and we always tell them to get those out of the way early.

CONNOLLY A number of guys will have night class after practice, so they'll go from the rink back to campus. Guys who don't have night class will go home and grab dinner, watch some TV and do their homework.

ROSS I live in a house with six other guys from the team. On a night that I need to bear down and work I'll eat at the dining hall and go to the library. Other nights I'll head home for dinner and hang out with the guys.

DUDDY I've always been good about going grocery shopping and not ordering out for meals. At first what I'd cook wasn't anything special — lots of plain chicken and mac and cheese. But I've branched out and started trying some different things.

HALTIGIN I do most of my homework at night. After dinner I'll do homework, or study, and have a little time to relax. I usually get to bed around midnight or 1 a.m. — then it's back at it the next day. ■

Scan this QR code with your smartphone to see a video of Chris Haltigin's typical day. You may need to download



an application for your smartphone to properly read the QR code. For more on a day in the life of these players — including how they spend their off days — visit collegehockeyinc.com.