From the Outdoor Rink to Development Inc.: Parent, Coach, and Director Navigation of Player Development in the Prolympic Field of Independent Youth Hockey

by

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how prolympic pressures influence the experience of parents, coaches, and directors in the field of independent youth hockey in Alberta. Formed from seeds of dissatisfaction with traditional minor hockey environments, independent youth hockey was created so youth hockey players could pursue competitive goals with greater intensity. Increased professionalization and commercialization contributed to the alignment of independent youth hockey with the concept of prolympism (Donnelly, 1996). Despite a growing body of research on the commercialization of youth sport, little attention has been paid to prolympism or to the rise of independent hockey in Canada and how its organizational, cultural, and economic logics reshape the lived experiences of key stakeholders. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate how prolympic pressures (Ingham et al., 2002) are embedded within, and reproduced through, independent hockey in Alberta. Guided by a critical orientation, the primary research question was: How do parents, coaches, and directors navigate and negotiate their participation in a prolympic field of hockey player development?

To address this question, the study draws on Bourdieu's sociological concepts of field, doxa, habitus, and capital, along with Lareau's (2002) 'concerted cultivation' and Brown's (2015) description of 'homo economicus,' to critically interrogate how prolympic structural and cultural forces shape the pursuit of development for major stakeholders in Alberta youth hockey. A qualitative design was employed, including semi-structured interviews with eleven directors, six coaches, and twelve parents, as well as practice and game observations of teams competing in independent youth hockey leagues in Alberta. This design enabled a comprehensive exploration of how dominant values, beliefs, and practices sustain prolympic ideals of elite performance, heightened competition, and widespread commercialization in independent youth hockey.

The analysis highlights the tensions between parental aspirations, coaching practices, organizational priorities, and the prolympic qualities that continue to reproduce inequities in youth sport. Findings reveal how prolympic ideals are generally accepted as stakeholders pursue intense competitive goals (Hughes & Coakley, 1991) in the field of independent youth hockey. Parents were required to navigate tensions between fostering their children's enjoyment of the game and tolerating the increasing demands of performance-oriented development pathways. Coaches described competitiveness, freedom, and choice as benefits of independent youth hockey, but these neoliberal elite-oriented values often constrained their ability to focus on developmental goals. Directors highlighted the value and efficiency of their programming, acknowledging the expectations of competitive stakeholders and offering few solutions to balance goals of inclusive participation.

This study makes two major theoretical contributions. First, it extends Bourdieu's framework of field, doxa, habitus, and capital by demonstrating how these concepts operate within the emerging and underexplored context of independent youth hockey. Second, it advances understanding of how stakeholders navigate the prolympic field by extending Lareau's concept of concerted cultivation and applying Brown's framing of homo economicus to show how directors adopt practices that position youth athletes within this prolympic system.

Empirically, this research offers one of the first sociological examinations of independent hockey in Canada, documenting how commercialization, competition, and elite-oriented values become normalized by stakeholders. Practically, it highlights the structural and cultural mechanisms that reinforce barriers to equitable participation in youth sport, providing evidence for policymakers, sport organizations, and educators who seek to design more inclusive models of development.

In sum, this dissertation addresses a significant gap in the sociology of youth sport by providing an empirically rich, theoretically-grounded analysis of independent youth hockey in Alberta. It demonstrates how social, cultural, and economic forces intersect to enable opportunities and reproduce barriers, offering important implications for theory, practice, and policy in Canadian sport.

Preface

This dissertation is an original work by Dallas B. Ansell. The research project, of which this dissertation is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Player Development in Alberta Youth Hockey”, Pro00134273, September 25, 2023.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to all the coaches who helped shape me into the player and person I am today. I'm especially grateful to three coaches whose influence lives on in the passion I have for sport.

To Marlon Monterrosa— I hope this work serves as a tribute to your ongoing impact on my life.

To Tommy Varughese and Jim Denison—having the chance to share part of my journey with you was an incredible honour. Tommy, your presence and passion are deeply missed. I carry your lessons with me every day. Jim, thank you for being a true advocate—for defending me, challenging me, and looking out for me in so many ways.

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1.0 Player Development in Alberta Youth Hockey

I remember Mom telling me about the day she registered my twin brother, Levi, and I for our first hockey season at the age of four. Neither my parents nor my three older siblings played hockey, except a brief stint when my oldest brother attempted to join the sport at the later age of 13. Although he knew how to skate, he felt discouraged by his abilities relative to his more experienced friends and decided instead to tackle his way through four years of high school football. Still, thanks to several factors, Levi and I had the opportunity to begin playing hockey only a couple years after learning how to walk: we were the fourth and fifth of a family of five children, our parents had 10 successful years of running the family business, and we had an enduring love of hockey passed down from Grandpa Larry. Without much prior knowledge about the sport, Mom bought us each a hockey player starter-pack from the local Canadian Tire, which included all the gear we needed to begin the season. Dad visited the local hardware store and bought enough two-by-fours to create a 30x50 foot rink in the backyard that he would diligently flood each evening with the garden hose. Levi and I used to spend countless hours on the backyard hockey rink that Dad made for us, perhaps most excitedly waiting for Mom to bring us some hot chocolate. With a patchwork arrangement of cardboard on the concrete to protect our skate blades, we were a short walk away from 1,500 square feet of ice available to us for nearly six months of the Canadian winter each year.

This was our middle-class playground, the prime location for us to develop an affinity for the sport and our initial skills, while cultivating our identities as “hockey players.” As we progressed through the minor and junior hockey systems, we stopped dragging out the garden hose to flood the backyard rink, instead playing on several local indoor hockey rinks and on organized teams. While we dedicated the next few teenage winters almost exclusively to hockey,

we also played soccer every spring, school sports including badminton and cross-country running, and we worked full-time in the summer months beginning at the age of 14. I am thankful for every opportunity I had to play and engage in sport in my younger years, although I would classify my participation as incidental rather than intentional. Encouraged by volunteer coaches, I grew up focusing more on working hard, having fun, and developing skill than on the rigid and specialized high-performance goals that increasingly govern the youth sport landscape (Ingham et al., 2002). I often wonder whether I would have still chosen to participate in competitive hockey today, considering the ways hockey has transformed to provide costly, deliberate, and intense year-round pathways for "development"—or if my own family would have been able to afford it.

Today, in 2025, youth hockey players from almost exclusively middle- and upper-class families have unprecedented opportunities to access organized and highly professionalized year-round minor hockey opportunities, with most opportunities focusing broadly on development. In the context of minor hockey, development has come to refer to all improvement or progression for players up the hierarchical pyramid, whether physically, intellectually, psychologically, emotionally, or socially (Lefebvre et al., 2022, Tadesse et al., 2020). These opportunities for development, to be sure, bring with them considerable enjoyment, fun, and pleasure for young aspiring hockey players, and for their families. However, Ingham et al. (2002) encourages readers to imagine how sport could look if the pursuit of development focused on maximizing the participation of youth, focusing on values of inclusion, equality, caring, and cooperation instead of performance. What is missing from the youth sport experience when it is designed to focus on year-round instrumental training, competition, and performance rather than on self-fulfilment and self-realization, and in relation to other values like inclusion and equality?

Sociology of sport scholars have raised critical questions about how professionalization and commercialization are fundamentally changing the experience of youth sport, for athletes, parents, coaches, and administrators alike, often in difficult ways (Ingham et al., 1999; Ingham et al., 2002).

Many of these changes have normalized drastic increases in the costs, commitment, competition, and intensity required to participate in amateur youth sport, as new "common sense" values of youth sport have ascended: the dream of making it to the pros, playing on a nationally representative team, or securing scholarships as the big payoff for these investments (Preston et al., 2020). Donnelly (1996) has more broadly referred to this as "prolympism," the convergence of two separate elite sport systems (the professional and the Olympic) into one dominant monoculture. Importantly, these changes have dramatically impacted much of youth sport, which now exists as a prolympic formation: an athletic mode of production (Ingham et al., 2002).

Since the 1970s, minor hockey has gradually transformed along these lines, a development that has become even more pronounced in recent years with the rise and expansion of independent hockey leagues. Formed in 2017, these new, pay-to-play independent leagues have become increasingly popular in the Western Canadian province of Alberta for families who want the best opportunities for their children and the ability to enrol them in the minor hockey program of their choice, regardless of their location. In Alberta, independent leagues like the Hockey Super League (HSL), Junior Prospects Hockey League (JPHL), and Premier Hockey League (PHL) now operate using an open, free-market system, which means that independent teams can recruit players from anywhere in the province. This stands in stark contrast to the closed system of traditional minor hockey environments where players are required to play

within predetermined regions based on their home address, and with others in their communities (Edwards, 2016).

In the new, open system, middle- and upper-class families can choose where and with whom their children take to the ice. These families, and a growing number of professional coaches, have increasingly embraced the autonomy, flexibility, and professionalism of independent leagues, especially with respect to training and competition. In many ways, independent organizations (e.g., HSL, 2020) have accentuated and amplified many of the pre-existing values and pressures of minor hockey by convincing players and parents alike that ongoing consumption of costly, year-round participation is necessary to be successful and to advance in the hierarchical minor hockey system (Decosse & Norcliffe, 2020). But in the new open system, families can now do so at their convenience, and at locations of their choosing. In this market-driven, independent context, all aspects of youth hockey are for sale: professional skills coaches of all kinds (HSL, 2021), outcome-focused competitions (Visek & Watson, 2005), and other commercial programming (Taylor & Garratt, 2010).

Still, little is known about how these commonsense understandings impact the lived experiences of those involved in independent hockey in Alberta. How does the move toward professional, commercial, and *prolympic* principles in independent hockey and the move further away from less organized, amateur, and recreational forms of play affect those involved in sport, as players, parents, coaches, or directors? How do they navigate these new social relations and the new free market system of independent youth hockey? Is it possible for those in independent hockey organizations to resist these “common sense” trends and still demonstrate their commitment to providing quality and competitive programming? Where do other values, like equity or inclusion, fit into these commercially-driven programs that are focused on competition,

success, or profit? Will commercialization and commodification close the door entirely to those who are unable or unwilling to invest significant resources of time and money to participate in hockey (Gruneau, 2016)? What other values and opportunities have been pushed aside to make way for a more entrenched version of privatized prolympism? And what will youth hockey look like in another 10 or 20 years if current prolympic and commercial trends continue unchecked?

To date, there has been a dearth of research on competitive, prolympic youth hockey in Canada, and no empirical research on the development of independent hockey leagues, leaving most of these questions raised above unanswered. In seeking to fill this void, this three-paper dissertation critically examines the experiences of those involved in independent youth hockey in Alberta. My overarching research question is: How do parents, coaches, and directors[1] navigate and negotiate their participation in a prolympic field of hockey player development?

To answer this broad question, I completed three interview studies with parents, coaches, and directors to identify how they navigate the prolympic youth hockey context in Alberta. In my study with middle-class parents, I focus on how they manage parenting decisions and pressures by asking: How do parents of youth hockey players navigate the tensions, contradictions, and increased demands of their children's participation in independent minor hockey? Next, I explore coaches' roles and contributions toward the increasing prolympic pressures in independent youth hockey, asking: How do youth hockey coaches support and pursue player development as they navigate the field of independent youth hockey? Finally, I discuss player development with directors – individuals who created their own independent youth hockey organizations –

[1] Note that I am using the title of 'director' to represent many potential roles and a variety of job titles including president, owner, executive director, manager, or administrator. While the term 'director' may not describe a person's exact position, the group of people to whom I refer are those who are making decisions for entire organizations, thereby distinguishing them from administrators responsible for day-to-day operations.

answering the question: How do youth hockey directors understand and facilitate player development within a corporatized, independent, and prolympic sport system?

In the chapter that follows, I discuss how prolympic pressures have influenced the pursuit of development in the specific field of competitive, independent youth hockey in Alberta. First, I conceptualize prolympism as an athletic mode of production that has become dominant in youth sport and in minor hockey in Canada (Ingham et al., 2002). In following Ingham et al. (2002), I underline how prolympism normalizes a particular understanding of development as defined by neoliberal, commercial, and professional values. I also consider the ways in which the prolympic system makes room for those involved in developing youth hockey players in Alberta to adopt the sport ethic, which maintains that true athletes must 1) make sacrifices, 2) strive for distinction, 3) accept risks and play through pain, and 4) refuse to accept limits (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Next, I describe the significance of hockey in Canada and provide a comprehensive explanation of the changing minor hockey context in Alberta, foregrounding the emergence of independent youth hockey in Alberta. I follow with a description of how the work of Bourdieu (1978), along with related ideas from Lareau (2002) and Brown (2015), can help me understand this new prolympic independent hockey field, and how various agents navigate it. In summarizing this literature on prolympism, minor hockey in Canada, and Bourdieu, I set up the three empirical studies I have conducted as part of my dissertation.

2.0 Prolympism, Minor Hockey in Canada, and Bourdieu

2.1 Prolympism and the Pursuit of "Development"

The stories of hockey players, especially those from less affluent backgrounds, who developed their skills in community rinks or their own backyards have become few and far between (Johnson & Ali, 2017). It is now much more common for minor hockey players to participate in an "athletic mode of production" with radically different values: the prolympic system. Ingham et al. (2002) contended that "prolympic sports are *the* elite model upon which sports for children and youth are based" (p. 312) and that athletes in prolympic models are in a state of "anticipatory socialization – learning what they need to do to move up to the next level" (p. 312).

Although development is commonly advertised as the primary goal in sport, Ingham et al. (2002) explain how prolympism subverts the priority of development and encourages participants to instead embrace the performance principle. Within prolympic sport, a variety of productive and performance-driven principles are encouraged in the widespread hunt for elite sport performance, including early talent identification (Lascu et al., 2021), participation in a meritocratic environment (Ingham et al., 1999), and a general orientation toward competitive performance (Ingham et al., 2002). Together, these pressures govern decisions to train with constant increases in intensity and frequency. The prolympic ideology is so powerfully prolific that it "tends to reinforce and reproduce itself; it marginalizes alternatives; and it creates a momentum that tends to draw all sport in that direction" (Donnelly, 1996, p. 30).

Far from being a new challenge, Jones (1975) recalled a century-old defense of amateur principles by the men of the Amateur Athletic Union of Canada, who feared that a commercial and professional focus would degrade the core moral and developmental principles of amateur

sport. The erosion of amateurism and older amateur values has continued within the amateur Alberta youth hockey context as many organizations have now incorporated elements of prolympism into their programming**.** In a process of reproduction like that described by Pringle (2005), prolympism as a system of beliefs becomes supported through incremental gains in hegemony as individuals willingly commit themselves to its creed. The relations of hegemony work continuously toward the solidification of principles that coincide with prolympic doctrine (Ingham et al., 2002). Actions or decisions that do not align with prolympism are therefore perceived as false, decreasing the likelihood of players, parents, or coaches acting differently within the sport context. Instead, those involved in youth sport bolster their involvement and cultivate a potent willingness to do whatever it takes to succeed in sport (Hughes & Coakley, 1991).

For Ingham et al., (2002), prolympism is multi-dimensional: it is structural, ideological, limbic, cultural, and social-relational. Through examination of each of these dimensions in the context of youth hockey, it becomes clear how prolympism impacts the pursuit of development in countless ways. One of the key *structural* dimensions of a prolympic system is its position as a feeder system for higher levels and professional leagues (Ingham et al., 2002). As players are trained and prepared for their participation in the prolympic system, it becomes increasingly clear how "identification, selection, and weeding out are all hallmarks of the Prolympic system of extraction and allocation" (Ingham et al., 1999, p. 251). Beginning with talent identification, youth are identified and recruited to participate in the prolympic system at increasingly younger ages, despite mounting criticism against the subjectivity (Guenter et al., 2019) and appropriateness of talent identification for youth (Lascu et al., 2021).

Talent identification now often occurs with athletes as young as 11, who may be ranked nationally in some sports as they pursue professional or Olympic levels (Andreatta, 2021; Andreatta, 2022; Brenner, 2016; Ingham et al., 2002). Although athletic success may come many years later for athletes, early identification of talent (i.e., at 8 years old; Rongen et al., 2015) and subsequent athlete monitoring seem to be the norm, especially when there are available programs or academies to continue training a reserve army of athletic labour (Ingham et al., 2002). Although it is nearly impossible to predict adult success based on the talent present in young athletes (Dorsch et al., 2020), talent identification becomes a powerful driver of the market because consumers are willing to pay for potential future success in the prolympic system (Ingham et al., 2002). But even if a youth athlete never reaches elite levels, they may still be able to justify their investment in sport based on what could have been.

Once an athlete has been recruited into the prolympic field, the *ideological* dimension of prolympism requires them to participate in the "achievement oriented, and purportedly meritocratic system" (Ingham et al., 2002, p. 309), where they will have the opportunity to demonstrate their competence. Therefore, those who are involved in prolympic sport must work hard to pursue goals that demonstrate their commitment to achievement, and it is expected that they would be rewarded for such efforts. In a strength and conditioning environment, Gearity and Mills (2012) adopted a Foucauldian perspective to highlight how modern sport prioritizes "order, discipline, obedience, health (for strategic purpose), production, efficiency and rationality" (p. 125). In this study, the lead author explained how these principles became foundational for his coaching to guarantee athletic success, financial gain, and his own employment. Demanding obedience from his athletes removed much of the ambiguity and uncertainty around his coaching, which allowed him to be efficient and organized in his delivery of programming. If

athletes did not follow his program, they were at risk of being replaced (Gearity & Mills, 2012). In other words, athletes who did not uncritically accept the demands of the coach would be deemed unworthy to participate in the meritocracy of the weight room (Ingham et al., 2002). This is no surprise within the prolympic system, as it is designed to teach athletes to sell their athletic labour (Donnelly, 1996) in the "production of an elite labor force" (Ingham et al., 2002, p. 324).

The intensive training and rationalistic development of individual bodies (Ingham et al., 1999) is one of the most pervasive practices in prolympic sport. As players commit to regular training, the hopes, dreams, and desires within their *limbic* systems cause them to internalize the apparent importance of competitive success in their pursuit of performance (Ingham et al., 2002). In this sense, prolympic sport is designed to satisfy the performance and pleasure demands of players as they learn to labour. However, as sport becomes more exclusionary and begins to produce more failures, more attention is directed to the apparent focus on development (Ingham et al., 2002). For example, common to every youth hockey context in Alberta is a commitment to youth player development, although this can be a particularly complex and ambiguous concept that can be described as an athlete's improvement (Legg et al., 2016; Preston & Fraser-Thomas, 2018), maturation (Balyi & Hamilton, 2010; Pichardo et al., 2018), or growth over time (McKeown & Ball, 2013; Preston et al., 2021). If failure and exclusion is inevitable, a focus on prolympic development could simultaneously keep athletes interested in the reserve army and satisfy their emotional and psychological needs, at least for the time being (Ingham et al., 2002).

Culturally, the focus on development and the broader values of prolympism aligns with the beliefs of many Canadians that sport has the potential to be a positive force in the lives of

those who participate (Bean & Forneris, 2017).[2] Fraser-Thomas and Strachan (2015) identify the following as the primary goals of youth sport: "1) to provide opportunities for youth to be physically active, 2) to develop motor skills to serve as a foundation for recreational or performance-based sport participation, and 3) to facilitate youths' psychosocial development" (p. 15). The authors add that competitive sport can teach youth to receive feedback, overcome setbacks, and to respond appropriately to wins and losses. Considering the level of interest and investment in ice hockey on a national level (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993; Scherer, 2021), as well as the popularity of the National Hockey League (NHL), Professional Women's Hockey League (PWHL), and Olympic events, it is evident that prolympism has been institutionalized into Canadian sporting culture (Ingham et al., 2002). This has solidified the prolympic priorities of production, consumption, and excellence into Canadian sport (Donnelly, 1996; Ingham et al., 2002). Blair invites readers to consider "the kind of impact a prolympic system will have on the future of high performance youth sport in Canada" (2009, p. 16). If the only stories shared in sport media involve the relentless pursuit of excellence, the chase for professional and Olympic championships, and the promise of prestige, then it should not be surprising when youth athletes prioritize those types of sport outcomes (Blair, 2009).

Finally, the *social-relational* dimension of prolympism helps to recognize how certain types of relationships and certain types of values are foundational to the experience of athletes within the prolympic system (Ingham et al., 2002). The coach-athlete relationship, for example, is at the heart of many of the competitive youth hockey objectives and "as the athlete progresses,

[2] This is evidently not the case for all Canadians, as current trends show significant decreases in Canadian hockey player registration over the last decade, largely due to increases in costs that exclude players from lower-income families from participating (Fitz-Gerald, 2020). Braes and Edwards (2021) indicated that declining registration is a sign of a lack of sustainability, which they define as "presently sufficing current needs without obstructing future needs being met. An organization that is stable has the aptitude to connect a community, broaden a customer base, lower operating costs, and benefit society" (p. 25).

these relationships become more compulsory and organized" (Ingham et al., 2002, p. 309). This, of course, is due to the overarching performance-orientation of the prolympic system, which demands that athletes be trained and progressed through the prolympic feeder system. This causes the goals of athlete advancement (Guenter et al., 2019), coaching success (Preston et al., 2020) and profit generation (Decosse & Norcliffe, 2020) to impact the relationship between the coach and the athlete, and often with parents. These impacts can also occur at a corporate level as organizations look to recruit and retain participants as consumers (Decosse & Norcliffe, 2020).

For example, programs may boast a strong commitment to developing skill and promote themselves as elite based on their apparent emphasis on process-oriented, rather than outcome-oriented, goals (Ronkainen et al., 2018). While a focus on skill development may appear to be in tune with proper developmental goals for children (Legg et al., 2016), the skill that is developed often serves the greater purpose of winning games and advancing up the prolympic ladder (Edwards, 2016; Preston et al., 2021; Riehl et al., 2019; Ronkainen et al., 2018). In this sense, social relations are the means through which athletes are engaged to serve the performance-related targets and goals within the prolympic system (Ingham et al., 2002).

Although coaches from minor hockey associations (MHAs), school sport academies (SSAs[3]), or independent programs may claim to focus more on development, they are likely to use the similar drills, practices, and feedback methods to encourage development for their athletes. Interestingly, similar principles and practices for development are often presented by some programs as supposedly more proficient approaches to programming than their competitors (e.g., Hockey Edmonton, 2021; HSL, 2021). Riehl et al. (2019) proposed that new ideas are not

[3] SSAs generally integrate sport programming within the educational curriculum. The number of SSAs in Alberta increased dramatically from 2005 to 2012 (Balderson, 2015).

common in hockey environments and that they tend to be more resistant to change. This deep-rooted commitment to traditional methods is likely to be connected to the nostalgia that surrounds the sport of ice hockey in Canada and not necessarily to proven best practices (Frederiksen et al., 2018; Kiely, 2012). Development, in this respect, runs the risk of becoming the culturally acceptable façade masking ongoing corporatization with commercialized, professionalized, and hyper-competitive programs and practices with clear beneficiaries, including junior and professional leagues (Ingham et al., 1999; Ingham et al., 2002).

Development has been used to describe such a broad range of practices and opportunities in the prolympic sport system that it has become an enigmatic term characterized by vagueness, ambiguity, and an unfortunate lack of clarity. For example, what is "development" and how is one supposed to measure an individual's development through their participation in a competitive team sport (Ericsson, 2020; Ingham et al., 2002)? Are there such things as best practices for "development" (Martel, 2015)? Is there an exclusive set of coaching practices that will facilitate the development of athletes more effectively than others (Skilnick, 2017)? While it may be a conundrum to answer these challenging questions, stakeholders in Alberta youth hockey are quick and confident to advertise their knowledge of proficient developmental practices (HSL, 2021; Skilnick, 2017). For example, Hockey Alberta declared that they "deliver the best development programming to the province's hockey community" (Skilnick, 2017, p. 1) while the HSL advocated that they have set "a new standard for hockey player development in Canada" (HSL, 2021, para. 5). Organizations can easily declare themselves to be experts in development, but without a concrete ability to track or measure an athlete's progress over months or years, these claims contain limited practical significance.

A key consequence of the performance orientation of the prolympic system is the positioning of athletes as expendable. After all, “it is not possible for every child entering into sport to become a professional or Olympic level athlete” (Ingham et al., 2002, p. 308). It is, therefore, advantageous for the prolympic feeder system to include a high number of participants at the lower levels, but at some point, most youth will fail in their quest for elite or professional competition (Ingham et al., 1999). However, this expendability is shrouded alongside the meritocratic details of the prolympic system, convincing prolympic hopefuls to focus more on working hard to succeed than on their probable expendability (Ingham et al., 1999; Ingham et al., 2002). This may force athletes to accept demanding, and sometimes abusive, coach practices in their pursuit of success (Coakley, 2007). In some cases, players are kept overwhelmingly committed to the daily programming as they perceive “that being able to endure and tolerate high volumes of training was the key to becoming a promising player” (Ødyna & Bjørndal, 2022, p. 9). This could work for the fortunate few athletes who advance to higher levels of competition, but many are provided false hope (Donnelly, 1996). In the prolympic system, “only the fittest should survive: All the rest are expendable” (Ingham et al., 1999, p. 251).

These changes have made it challenging to describe what it means to develop a young player, while considering the potential positive and negative consequences that accompany their sport participation. The pursuit of “development” requires parents to invest significant amounts of time and money to demonstrate their commitment to the dominant values of the hockey subculture (Preston et al., 2020). On the side of practitioners, coaches and directors influence the delivery and structure of development by embracing common-sense prolympic values of practice and competition (Martel, 2015). Because development cannot be measured instantaneously or over short periods of time, those involved in sport must instead rely on superficial qualities of

sport environments such as perceptions of "good" coaching (Balderson, 2015), preconceived notions about how "development" should be pursued (Preston et al., 2021), and programs that emphasize the relentless pursuit of lofty goals (Padaki et al., 2017).

Parents must choose between a variety of programs for their children, many that require their children to specialize; coaches have the option to leverage their sport-specific knowledge to generate a profit in more professionalized programs or to remain committed to volunteer-driven public programs; and sport directors from public and independent contexts struggle to attract participants that necessitate the survival of their programs. The dilemma for these groups is to determine how they can successfully navigate this competitive and prolympic youth hockey environment by optimizing the development of players within the context in a way that is not considered extreme, especially as the context becomes more and more crowded with commercial opportunities.

2.1.1 Commercialization in Sport

Due to understandings of appropriate development with the prolympic system, youth sport became highly commodified (Ingham et al., 2002): the labour of young athletes has significant commercial potential and value (Coakley, 2010). As I discussed earlier, talent identification aligns with commercial priorities because parents are willing to invest large amounts of money into their children's sport experiences based on the potential that their children could one day play at an elite level (Smoll et al., 2011). Excessive commercialization results in the unfortunate exclusion of less affluent families, many of whom are racialized (Richtel, 2023), a reality that is palpable in the expensive sport of ice hockey (Campbell & Parcels, 2013). Decosse and Norcliffe (2020) explained how organized hockey environments demonstrate widespread commodification by pointing out the "costly specialized training;

ownership and exclusive use of hockey rinks and training facilities; early adoption of sports agents; and the pressured coaching of teams, increasingly over a 12-month season" (p. 121). These changes lead to increased prices and the preservation of commercial interests in the prolympic system (Campbell & Parcels, 2013; Ingham et al., 2002; Smoll et al., 2011).

As athletes aspire to maximize their development in sport, their willingness to invest time, energy, and money into their development results in the commodification of the products or services (i.e., coaching, training, scouting, or managing) that could support their athletic pursuits (Adams & Laurendeau, 2018). De Knop et al. (1996) described a worldwide trend where "economization has turned sport into big business, in which the economic value often supersedes the traditional values of sport" (p. 10). Prolympic sport as a global cultural force has great potential to generate income when a high number of players are involved, as the earning potential is driven through products (i.e., equipment or gear) and services (i.e., training camps or specialty coaching) that purportedly expedite development for this large population (Ingham et al., 2002; Taylor & Garratt, 2010). Even playing time is used as a commodity in sport as athletes look to develop expertise, increasingly in privately owned facilities and big-box training centres (Feeley et al., 2016; Preston et al., 2021). The most explicit action athletes can take to demonstrate their absolute commitment to maximum development is to increase the time they spend practicing and training to prove they are willing to exert exceptional effort toward their goals (Ford et al., 2009). This type of commitment often compels athletes to specialize in a single sport at an early age (Drake & Breslin, 2018).

Early specialization is a convincing and influential path for athletes to take within the prolympic sport system because of the perception of it as an objective, predictable way to improve in sport and to ascend the prolympic pyramid (Konoval et al., 2021). Ingham et al.

(2002) explained how it is commonly "the desire on the part of parents to have their child enter the Prolympic pyramid at an early age" (p. 314). Specialization is also highly supportive of commercialization as participants are encouraged to invest in their ability to produce behaviours (i.e., labour) that are considered more useful and potentially more profitable (Preston et al., 2021). Early specialization offers the seemingly logical explanation that participating in a sport at a younger age gives a young person more time to develop skill and expertise and thus offers them a greater chance at athletic success (Drake & Breslin, 2018). While a multisport, late specialization has been observed in European contexts such as Sweden (Martel, 2015) and Norway (Smolianov et al., 2020), Martel explained how North American athletes tend to sacrifice their developmental priorities by specializing early to prepare for frequent competition. The result for youth hockey players in leagues like the HSL and the Canadian Sport School Hockey League (CSSHL[4]) is generally more expensive programming, longer sessions, and greater commitments for travel and competition, often requiring youth to discontinue their participation in other sports (Andrews, 2010).

This current North American trend of early specialization (Legg et al., 2016) prevails even though there are many critiques and concerns associated with early specialization in youth sport, centered around psychological issues that include burnout, exhaustion, and amotivation (Andrews, 2010; Mosher et al., 2020; Waldron et al., 2020). What is it that could drive parents, coaches, and directors to ignore these concerns by continuing to accept this type of extreme commitment? Significant and early increases in training do not "necessarily benefit the players, because they were underpinned by erroneous understandings of development as a process that is

[4] The CSSHL is a group of Hockey-Canada accredited schools that provide opportunities for youth players to compete against other sport academies located across Canada and the United States (CSSHL, 2021). While sanctioned by Hockey Canada and USA Hockey, the costs to participate in the CSSHL may climb to more than $70,000 per academic year (Decosse & Norcliffe, 2020).

both controllable and linear" (Ødyna & Bjørndal, 2022, p. 14). As participants try to avoid falling behind in the prolympic system, they get caught "in a mad scramble to gain a perceived competitive edge for immediate youth sport 'success'" (DiFiori et al., 2017, p. 128). The practice of early specialization runs contrary to the recommendations of several academic researchers who advocate that multisport athletes may have better chances at long-term sport success (e.g., Brenner, 2016; Martel, 2015; Ogden & Edwards, 2016; Seifert et al., 2019). However, in the prolympic system and "to be successful at their sporting labors, many take risks" (Ingham et al., 2002, p. 317).

2.1.2 Professionalization in Youth Sport

Because commercialized and specialized programming is so prevalent in youth sport, organizations must now set themselves apart from other providers by proving they can develop players even more effectively and efficiently. In Alberta's youth hockey context, this is accomplished by offering programs that are professionalized and fully rationalized. Dowling et al. (2014) defined sport professionalization as "the process by which sport organisations, systems, and the occupation of sport, transforms from a volunteer driven to an increasingly business-like phenomenon" (p. 527). When sport operates according to professional priorities, it may encourage more focused, determined, and persistent behaviour in athletes (Domingues & Gonçalves, 2013), conduct that aligns well with the pursuit of performance-based development.[5]

However, professional sport practices may also come with a host of unintended consequences. Legg et al. (2016), for example, outlined that "overorganization, adult control,

[5] Domingues and Gonçalves (2013) found during their discussions with parents of U14 and U16 soccer players that they preferred their children to participate in more competitive and professional programs based on greater development potential in areas of work ethic and social relationships. Professionalization is commonly pursued amidst "demands from both parents and sport organizations for more effective skill development and better performance levels" (De Knop et al., 1996, p. 33).

injury or abuse, and professionalization are some of the problems associated with the traditional North American design of youth sport leagues" (p. 369). There are several areas in youth sport that provide evidence of this professionalization, including the exclusion of individuals who are not deemed valuable in competitive contexts (Preston et al., 2021), and a loss of balance between sport and other areas of life, such as family or schooling (Balderson, 2015; Fraser-Thomas & Strachan, 2015; Ronkainen et al., 2018). Although coaches often communicate the importance of academics, Ronkainen et al. (2018) found that coaches of club hockey teams were not able to "recall specific incidents when they would have discussed education with their team and did not know what kind of grades the players had at school" (p. 42). Similarly, Bjørndal and Ronglan (2018) presented the voice of an athlete who expressed confusion after missing practice to prepare for an exam only to be reprimanded by her coach in a team meeting for doing so, even though the coach often highlighted the importance of school. Is this coach acting unusually or is this now common practice in youth sport?

The implications of professionalization in youth sport are significant as an increasing number of youth athletes drop out of sport or choose to limit their participation in physical activity altogether (Jones et al., 2021). Increasing dropout is likely because youth participants no longer enjoy their competitive participation (Butcher et al., 2002; Crane & Temple, 2015; Drake & Breslin, 2018). This may be the result when sport has more focus on "higher levels of athletic achievement and less focus on the 'fun' aspects of athletic competition" (Feeley et al., 2016, p. 234). At the elite levels, pressure to win and injury have been found to be the most common reasons for athletes to withdraw from their activity (Butcher et al., 2002). For more expensive sports, it may be that parents of youth cannot afford to buy the equipment or pay the team fees associated with their participation because of commodification that comes alongside

professionalization (Edwards & Kulczycki, 2018). Andrews (2010) suggested that "seventy percent of kids participating in sports now drop out by the age of thirteen because of specialization, professionalism, and pressure from coaches and parents" (p. 577). If the pressures and expectations of adults are causing youth athletes to quit participating in sport, it is essential to determine the cause (Chard et al., 2015; Crane & Temple, 2015). A plethora of recent research has highlighted concerns surrounding professionalization, stressing most significantly that professionalized sport cannot serve the broader participatory goals of youth sport while also advancing a performance discourse (e.g., Andrews, 2010; Dorsch et al., 2020; Legg et al., 2016; Preston et al., 2021; Taylor & Garratt, 2010). Who, then, is benefiting from the professionalization of sport if it is not the participants themselves?

Still, there has been some pushback against the professionalization of youth sport in North America, such as the "removal of standings and scorekeeping, smaller playing fields, fewer players per game, and travel and playing time restrictions" (Legg et al., 2016, p. 369).[6] Another opposing force to the professionalization of youth sport is The Reformed Sports Project, a resource created "to restore healthy balance and perspective in all areas of sport, through education and advocacy" (Buonocore, 2023, para. 1). However, it is challenging to advocate for a reduction in sport programming when "parents and coaches are believed to encourage such inappropriate practices due to the misconception that a high level of achievement at youth level predicts adult success" (Kearney et al., 2020, p. 157). In many ways, it appears that parents, coaches, and directors are advancing the pursuit of development each in their own way, often by embracing commercial and professional principles that push participants towards the dream of

[6] Smolianov et al. (2020) also described the recent cancellation of a national championship for 11-year-old hockey players as one recent example of a positive reorientation of priorities, "because of the importance that parents and coached [sic] put on winning" (p. 408).

elite performance and achievement (Abdou, 2021; Ingham et al., 2002; Taylor & Garratt, 2010). These forces "partly explain the transmission of the professional hockey value system to the minor leagues" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 254), and there is a need to determine how parents, coaches, and directors accept or reject current approaches to youth hockey player development as they become progressively defined by commercialized, professionalized, and intense practices, and by money.

2.1.3 The Sport Ethic

One ideology that has bolstered my understanding of the intense pursuit of development in the Alberta youth hockey landscape and in the prolympic system is the sport ethic, which describes the ways in which athletes strive, risk, and sacrifice in the name of elite sport performance (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Coakley described ideology as "*webs of ideas and beliefs that people use to give meaning to the world and make sense of their experiences*" (2007, p. 20; emphasis in original). In historical sport contexts such as those found in ancient Greece, excellent sport performance was best displayed by demonstrating proficiency in a number of activities; however, there has been a transition in recent decades to instead value exceptional and specialized performance (Sage, 1998). Commitment to the sport ethic is suggested to be the Olympic motto "'citius, altius, fortius' [faster, higher, stronger] taken seriously and to the extreme" (Hughes & Coakley, 1991, p. 320). Considerable pressure for players as they seek to improve and excel within their sport environments drives them to accept and espouse the values associated with the sport ethic (Budziszewski, 2019; Coker-Cranney et al., 2018). However, as non-player members – parents, coaches, and directors – of the youth hockey environment may also produce, reproduce, and be transformed by the sport ethic, I consulted with these groups to

better understand how their actions and decisions are positioned to support player development (Coakley, 2007).

There is no question it is necessary to commit time and energy to pursue development and eventually elite sport performance. However, Hughes and Coakley (1991) explained how unconstrained dedication to sport-related goals can result in participants embodying the sport ethic, embracing extreme or deviant behaviour that "is the result of being too committed to the goals and norms of sport" (p. 308). An unwavering commitment to this ideal means athletes are willing to play through pain (Coker-Cranney et al., 2018) or subject themselves to conditions of malnutrition (Johns, 1998) to demonstrate their commitment to becoming a true athlete. Athletes may see the intense commitment of others in sport and "find it essential to follow this belief system to become successful" (Budziszewski, 2019, p. 5). Madrigal et al. (2015) completed a study of rugby in the United States, examining 11 (five male, six female) rugby players and their reasons for playing through injuries. They had espoused the sport ethic so completely that they minimized the significance of very real injuries (i.e., a broken ankle, dislocated shoulder, or broken nose) to justify playing through them (Madrigal et al., 2015). Budziszewski (2019) observed similar trends even in a recreational youth lacrosse team, using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to illustrate how youth players were pushed to embrace the sport ethic at different levels, especially by parents and coaches. The embodiment of the sport ethic by directors remains a void in the literature (Budziszewski, 2019; Dorsch et al., 2020) and is one of the gaps I fill with this research.

Prolympic youth sport has become a welcome home for a burgeoning commitment to the sport ethic (Ingham et al., 2002). Budziszewski identified a strong link between youth sport and the sport ethic in "the extraordinary lengths that parents and athletes will go to both financially

and physically to overcome the barriers of sport" (2019, p. 32). Importantly, those involved in youth sport must accept their participation in a meritocracy that requires youth to work hard during longer seasons and at a high level of competition, even though these experiences may subject them to abuse, injury, or strains on family life (Abdou, 2021; Coakley, 2010; Ingham et al., 2002). Parents generally accept these risks in the attempt to fulfill their role as a good sport parent, and "high-profile, professionally administered, exclusive, specialized, and usually expensive youth sport programs were identified by many parents as ideal contexts for controlling their children and making sure they were in a visible and culturally valued activity" (Coakley, 2010, p. 18). While many of these characteristics are employed in support of the developmental pursuits of youth hockey players, they also demonstrate the commitment of other members of Alberta youth hockey to the sport ethic. Hughes and Coakley indicated that "owners, managers, sponsors, and coaches – all of whom exercise control within sport – often benefit when athletes accept and overconform to the sport ethic" (1991, p. 315). While prolympism and the sport ethic are undoubtedly influential in the broader context of youth sport (Donnelly, 1996; Hughes & Coakley, 1991), there are also many factors specific to ice hockey in Canada that make it ripe for examination.

2.2 Ice Hockey in Canada

Ice hockey in Canada has particularly deep historical roots and has been inextricably tied to Canadian identity, albeit in uneven ways (Adams, 2014; Ramshaw & Hinch, 2006). Canadian hockey is particularly important because of a deeply rooted sense of nationalism and nostalgia, and the dominance of the spectacle of professional hockey and other events like the World Cup, the Olympics, and the International Ice Hockey Federation's (IIHF) annual World Junior Ice Hockey Championship (Johnson & Ali, 2017). While hockey has been viewed as a symbol of

national unity (Wong & Dennie, 2021), it has also served at times to dramatize and inflame separatist ambitions in Quebec (Scherer, 2021), especially though star players like Maurice "Rocket" Richard, who had a special way of galvanizing Quebecois identity and nationalism (Valentine & Toal, 2021). It is often touted that the first game of hockey in the entire world was played in Windsor, Nova Scotia, which "has proclaimed itself as the birthplace of hockey" (Wong & Dennie, 2021, p. 193). This early and historical connection to hockey provides for some a salient reason to tie hockey to their conceptualization of Canadian identity (Jedwab & Holly, 2021).

Arcand et al. (2021) explained how Indigenous history is more accurate and complete when one considers the ties between Indigenous culture and hockey; the lead author, Eugene Arcand, found hockey so inexplicably tied to his identity that "hockey saved [his] life" (Arcand et al., 2021, p. 16). More than just a recreational activity, ice hockey has become "deeply ingrained in the culture, economy and wellbeing of people" (Damyanov et al., 2012, p. 1). Wong and Dennie (2021) identified that there are over twice as many indoor hockey arenas in Canada (approximately 3,300) than in the second-place United States (1,535 indoor arenas), clear support for the embeddedness of hockey in Canadian society. However, rather than inviting people to participate in a sport environment that is diverse and inclusive, ice hockey in Canada now seems to focus almost primarily on the question, "How can skill and expertise be best developed?" (Uehara et al., 2018, p. 162). This focus may bode well for Canada's recent competitive international success and to produce future players for the professional leagues, but it does not attend to a shifting Canadian demographic that may not value such an unwavering emphasis on elite performance (Wong & Dennie, 2021).

2.2.1 *Hockey Canada*

Today, the organization that governs most hockey activity in Canada is a national sport organization called Hockey Canada, incorporated in 1968 by the Government of Canada as an arm's length organization with the original goal of assembling a more competitive Canadian national team for international competitions (Scherer, 2021). The political nature of hockey was clear from the very launch of the organization in 1968;[7] it was created in large part to address "questions of national identity and unity that were political issues of the time" (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993, p. 261), and to professionalize the sport to ensure that future Canadian teams would be represented by the best National Hockey League (NHL) players. However, the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association (CAHA), the sport's existing governing body that was recognized by the IIHF, had traditionally controlled the national team and represented Canada at IIHF meetings; it was soon to be supplanted by a new class of Hockey Canada's professional executives, like Alan Eagleson, who enjoyed the tacit support of the Government of Canada and the NHL (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993; Scherer, 2021).

Throughout the early 1970s, Hockey Canada and the NHL steadily gained control over matters pertaining to international hockey, even though the CAHA retained recognition internationally as the Canadian decision-making body by the IIHF (Scherer, 2021). As long as

[7] Although Canadian hockey supremacy seemed certain through much of the 1950s, the Allan Cup teams representing Canada internationally in the 1960s began to lose consistently, demonstrating that their level of amateur play would not be competitive enough against international forces like the Soviet Union (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993). Father David Bauer attempted to address this international failure by assembling a full-time national team consisting of college and graduating junior hockey players in 1963, but this was relatively futile as this team still did not have the support of professional players and continued to be unsuccessful (Scherer, 2022). Continued defeat on the world stage prompted direction from the Canadian government to create a new governing body for hockey, which was promised throughout Pierre Trudeau's 1968 election campaign and assembled through the Task Force on Sport for Canadians in August of 1968, (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993). The result was a government-funded and mandated organization called Hockey Canada, whose primary goal was to assemble a competitive Canadian National Team (Scherer, 2021). The political and cultural need for Canadian international hockey success paved the way for the eventual acceptance of professional players on the international stage.

international organizations like the IIHF and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) continued to uphold traditional values of amateurism, Hockey Canada could not gain a complete foothold on the international stage, although Hockey Canada did successfully establish a global position when they merged with the CAHA in 1994. Until then, however, Hockey Canada was at the mercy of professional sport organizations – the NHL and the World Hockey Association – who owned the rights of professional athletes and influenced their ability to compete internationally (Scherer, 2021).

In a matter of a few years, though, there was a sea change[8] that spurred the "continued erosion of the once-dominant code of amateurism" (Scherer, 2022, p. 2) culminating in the gradual acceptance of professional players on the world stage, thanks in large part to the actions of agent, lawyer, and promoter Alan Eagleson. Eagleson used his position on the Hockey Canada board, in addition to his role as President of the National Hockey League Players Association, to influence IIHF officials to embrace professionalism, ensuring that he could benefit from the emerging international landscape, including the creation of the first truly open-play international hockey competition, the 1976 Canada Cup (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993; Scherer, 2021). The actions of Eagleson were paramount in the growth and authority of Hockey Canada as a member of the international ice hockey community and eventually contributed to the progress that Canada was able to make toward their goal of returning to being a dominant force on the ice

[8] Changes in IOC and IIHF personnel through the 1970s promoted an agreeable response to the increased professionalization and commercialization of international hockey, including most notably the departures of Avery Brundage, the IOC president from 1952 to 1972, and Bunny Ahearne, who served rotating terms as vice-president and president of the IIHF from 1951 to 1975 (Hardy & Holman, 2018). Brundage and Ahearne were strident defenders of amateurism; Brundage, in particular, "abhorred professionalism and remained a staunch defender of pure amateurism" (Scherer, 2022, p. 4). Their replacements, Lord Killanin as president of the IOC and Günther Sabetzki as president of the IIHF, were much more willing to accept endorsements and other forms of advertising revenue, due in part to their journalism backgrounds and a greater acceptance of commercialism in amateur sport (Hardy & Holman, 2018).

internationally. The incorporation of professional qualities into amateur sport[9] and eventually international competition represented an "ideological turn to professionalism in international hockey [that] was now virtually unstoppable" (Scherer, 2022, p. 4). This trend toward professionalization helped set the foundation for many of the developments in youth hockey today, including the value of competition and success. Events such as the Four Nations Cup – a highly televised tournament between Canada, Finland, Sweden, and the United States that is operated by the NHL and features only NHL players – showcase the continued influence of the professional game, with over 10 million viewers tuning in to watch the final game of the tournament (Feldscher, 2025). Importantly, ideologies like professionalization tend to perpetuate hegemonic relations in the sense that some people or groups – such Eagleson historically or the NHL in this recent example – will benefit more than others (Ingham et al., 2002).

Although Hockey Canada has undoubtedly been influential over the past 50 years, the organization has recently been linked to a series of sexual assault allegations, which involve members of Canadian men's World Junior hockey teams spanning the last two decades (Klinkenberg & Baum, 2022). In a series of desperate attempts to defend the accused players and itself, Hockey Canada officials revealed that the organization has paid over $8 million over the last two decades to quietly settle cases of alleged abuse to keep their players away from public scrutiny (Mason, 2022). One woman, a victim of an alleged sexual assault committed by several members of the 2018 Canadian World Junior team, was paid as much as $3.55 million dollars by Hockey Canada when she agreed not to disclose any details of the event and to refrain from

[9] While the CAHA held control of both domestic and international hockey in Canada until 1968, Hockey Canada effectively replaced the CAHA internationally as professional players were increasingly accepted for international competition (Scherer, 2022). However, the CAHA retained influence over amateur hockey until the growing influence of Hockey Canada resulted in the merge of the CAHA and Hockey Canada in 1994 (Scherer, 2021). This amalgamation ensured that Hockey Canada – a staunch supporter of professionalization – would obtain complete control of both international and amateur hockey (Scherer, 2022).

pressing charges against the players (Chidley-Hill, 2022). Unfortunately, some settlement dollars are likely to have come from the registration fees of minor hockey players, a devastating surprise for hockey families across the country (Klinkenberg & Baum, 2022). In a recent scathing open letter endorsed by many prominent Canadian academics, this type of issue is evidence of "systemic problems and a symptom of a deeply rooted culture in hockey" (Lenskyj et al., 2022, p. 1).

MacDonald (2018) has been particularly critical of culture issues in Canadian hockey that include homophobic, homonegative, and a variety of other discriminatory and exclusionary views. While Hockey Canada plans to implement a variety of changes to gathering concerns, managing complaints, and conducting enhanced character screening, scholars question whether it will "be enough to fix the deeply entrenched norms and cultural drivers of these problems" (Lenskyj et al., 2022, p. 3).

Although my research will not explore this scandal specifically, these events illustrate a relevant connection to the root of my research, which considers how player development is so zealously pursued by members of the hockey community, even by those who are not players. Hockey Canada's directors revealed they were willing to sacrifice their ethical standards to avoid disrupting the pursuit of excellent sport performance by their elite performers. Through these decisions, they risked their personal and professional reputations and unreasonably pushed through the obstacles they faced in their support of sport performance. Indeed, this event appears to be the tip of the iceberg when it comes to troubling instances of maltreatment, abuse, and assault in the prolympic Canadian sport system (Kerr et al., 2020). Youth sport in Canada is unique in that it "is the only child-populated domain in Canada that is completely autonomous and self-regulating" (Kerr et al., 2020, p. 2), a feature that reduces oversight and increases the

vulnerability of youth involved in sport. In response to the problematic culture of sport in Canada, “more than two dozen sport and activist organizations are calling on Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to launch a national inquiry” (Ewing, 2023, para. 1), but this call is yet to be answered. While issues regarding inappropriate conduct exist in gymnastics, swimming, and rowing (Kerr et al., 2020), hockey could be one of the worst (MacDonald, 2018).

2.2.2 *Competitive Youth Hockey in Alberta*

Hockey in Alberta has been regulated for over 100 years by Hockey Alberta (formerly the Alberta Amateur Hockey Association), which is the provincial sports organization and a member branch of Hockey Canada (Hockey Alberta, 2021). Since its inception in 1907, Hockey Alberta has been the primary provider of hockey programming for Albertans, serving approximately 65,000 players – a majority being youth participants. At the more competitive levels, players participated through local club hockey organizations, which are affiliated with Hockey Alberta and have traditionally been advocated as the “primary pathway for youth Canadian hockey players to reach higher levels of competition, such as the National Hockey League” (Edwards, 2016, p. 5). Edwards (2016) described how Hockey Alberta historically held exclusive control of the development of competitive youth players in Alberta through the club hockey system. Essentially, players were required to play for club teams that operated within a pre-defined region. If a player wanted to play for a different club, they could only do so if their family moved within the boundaries of the other club. Edwards (2016) described this arrangement as a closed system because of the relatively low amount of freedom to move around or outside of the dominant system.

However, the “scope of minor hockey has changed within Alberta with the addition of ‘competing’ programs that are not registered by Hockey Alberta” (Hockey Alberta 2019, p. 1).

The introduction of school and independent programs in recent years has opened wide the formerly closed system of competitive youth hockey in Alberta, forcing clubs to re-define their programs to offer a more enticing competitive landscape (Edwards, 2016). For example, Hockey Edmonton – the regional Hockey Alberta authority in the city of Edmonton – released an Elite Stream Hockey Program Framework, which they described as the "bible that will guide the development of players, coaches, and programs for the Athletic Clubs in the capital region" (Hockey Edmonton, 2021, p. 7). In this apparently sacred prolympic framework, several ambitious goals were identified as orthodox, which include structuring programs like professional and collegiate settings, striving for consistent winning percentages (above .500), and supporting more players to be drafted into the Western Hockey League (WHL).

The U15 male hockey context in Alberta appears to be most deeply embedded with hyper-competitive, prolympic priorities based on the perceived importance of early sport and career advancement, especially because of the connection of this age group to draft processes (Edwards & Washington, 2015). Youth hockey players aged 14 in Alberta are eligible to be drafted into the WHL, a member of the Canadian Hockey League (CHL) and a league that is considered professional[10] (Edwards & Washington, 2015). While the U15 age group is particularly important, it is also vital to consider how U13 players are influenced by dominant scouting practices that precede these draft processes (Madsen et al., 2020). Guenter et al. (2019) indicated that "the Canadian Hockey League is the world's largest developmental junior ice hockey league and supplies more players to the NHL than any other league" (p. 324), making it a

[10] The Ontario Hockey League, Quebec Major Junior Hockey League, and the Western Hockey League together make up the CHL, which operates across Canada and the United States (Edwards & Washington, 2015). It is considered professional because some CHL players' rights are owned by NHL teams (Washington & Edwards, 2018) and due to a modest stipend (i.e., $50-$150 per week) that players receive for their participation on CHL teams (Thornicroft, 2020).

highly desirable context for aspiring athletes. Guenter et al. completed their research by recruiting 16 current and former WHL scouts to determine the intangible traits – such as work ethic, determination, and loyalty – that increase players' likelihood to be successfully drafted into the WHL.[11] Draft systems heighten the importance of talent identification and perpetuate the idea that unselected athletes could miss a window of opportunity, making the WHL U15 Draft a process that can put pressure on young athletes trying to gain access to more elite streams of competition (Guenter et al., 2019).

Many athletes also increase their chances for successful development by participating in SSAs, which have exploded in popularity over the last two decades, increasing from three Alberta schools in 2005 to 93 schools in 2012 (Balderson, 2015). Motivation for athletes to attend an SSA has typically centered around "better coaching, better competition and a flexible academic schedule" (Balderson, 2015, p. 29). Sport academies tend to endorse the belief that players must be involved in large quantities of coach-led practice to reach an elite level (Denison et al., 2017; Uehara et al., 2020).[12] The most elite SSA, the CSSHL, is a fully sanctioned program under Hockey Canada and has quickly become a major source of players drafted to the WHL (CSSHL, 2021).

Decosse and Norcliffe (2020) specified that participation in one CSSHL program at the Shawnigan Lake School in neighbouring British Columbia can cost up to $71,300 per academic

[11] Guenter et al.'s (2020) intangible characteristics highlight the importance for athletes to work as hard as possible in the prolympic meritocracy, to be noticed by WHL scouts (Ingham et al., 2002). In the WHL, players are often billeted away from home at the age of 15 and are required to manage their high school commitments while playing close to 100 games throughout the season (Western Hockey League, 2020). These WHL organizations act as a "training center for highly athletically gifted individuals to train to become elite athletes" (Leong & Chorney, 2020, p. 658).

[12] Within the academy context, there is a clear division between elite and nonelite SSAs; in the Edmonton region, most SSAs would be considered nonelite (Leong & Chorney, 2020), but many athletes attending nonelite SSAs also compete for local club hockey organizations. Participation in SSA programs comes at a significant cost, with nonelite SSAs around $4,000 (Marino, 2021) and elite programs "in the range of $15,000 and $30,000 per academic year" (Balderson, 2015, p. 28).

year. In their analysis, Decosse and Norcliffe indicated that the rapid expansion and substantial expenditures associated with these schools illustrate the connection of these prolympic contexts to neoliberalism. In other words, the context operates according to a free market such that schools can charge whatever affluent consumers are willing to pay. Although they are costly, since their creation in 2009, the success of CSSHL programs at facilitating athletes' movement to more elite leagues has not gone unnoticed (CSSHL, 2021). Decker (2019) highlighted that "in the 2019 Western Hockey League (WHL) [U15] Draft, 85 student- athletes were selected from the CSSHL alone, including 13 of the top 22 selections" (p. 6), making the CSSHL a prime context for players hoping to play at the highest possible level. Issues of social class, of course, are front and center when the most expensive programs are the ones that produce the most successful athletes (Taylor & Garratt, 2010). It is also important to recognize how it is the unpaid amateur labour of student-athletes that makes possible the economic viability of expensive youth sport organizations (Gruneau, 2016). As organizations like the CSSHL exclude those who cannot participate financially (Ogden & Edwards, 2016), new organizations have looked to fill the void.

In response to elite and exclusive leagues like the CSSHL, several independent organizations have emerged that provide programming advertised as elite, although their lack of regulation makes it difficult to assess their overall level of play. Many of these independent teams seem to have been created as a haven for, and by, intense and highly committed individuals: a field in which true development can occur (Bourdieu, 1977). Crucially, these organizations are not officially sanctioned by Hockey Canada (Hockey Alberta, 2019). Without the need to abide by Hockey Alberta recommendations, non-sanctioned programs offer more flexibility for member organizations to run their programs independently and to recruit athletes from anywhere in the province. For example, the HSL was created in Edmonton in 2017 by

Silent Ice Sports & Entertainment[13] and has attracted over 1500 athletes between the levels of U9 and U13 (HSL, 2021). Perhaps the most significant difference between the HSL and local MHAs is the commitment of the HSL to provide access to professional skills coaches (HSL, 2021). The decision for directors, coaches, and parents to create and support these non-sanctioned programs not only demonstrates resistance to historical arrangements in sport but also displays their potential to act with agency within the youth hockey environment in Alberta. Notably, the creation of independent youth hockey programs as a form of resistance to existing opportunities is not unique to Alberta; similar independent opportunities exist in Ontario, including the Greater Toronto Hockey League (GTHL), a league that boasted revenue of $8.8 million dollars in 2022 (Kennedy & Kalman-Lamb, 2023).

Independent programs draw so many athletes out of local minor hockey associations (MHAs) that there is a concerted effort to change the MHA context to avoid losing players to the CSSHL or HSL, often by mimicking the same competitive priorities as the leagues they compete against (Hockey Edmonton, 2021). The rapid expansion of youth hockey opportunities in Alberta makes it incredibly difficult to determine whether one context is better than the next and raises questions about which program qualities will attract and retain program participants, especially with the lack of diversity between contexts (Edwards, 2016).

For example, how can parents be expected to know which programs will be the most suitable for their child's development when professional but potentially problematic programs

[13] Silent Ice Sports & Entertainment is described as "an innovative market leader in the development of sports and entertainment properties, with a focus on vertical integration of athlete, teams, leagues and media" (Silent Ice, 2023, para. 1). In addition to the HSL, the group also owns the Spruce Grove Saints in the Alberta Junior Hockey League, the Seattle Thunderbirds in the WHL, the Stony Plain Eagles in the Chinook Hockey League, and the new Junior Prospects Hockey League, along with other busing and media divisions. Their executive leadership group includes Dan and Lindsey Leckelt, brothers and former owners of a business called Silent-Aire, which they sold in 2021 to Johnson Controls for $870 million dollars (Linnane, 2021); Ryan Smyth, a popular former NHL player; and several other prominent individuals in the Edmonton hockey community (Silent Ice, 2023).

are gaining popularity? How can coaches be expected to prioritize developmental goals and remain in volunteer positions when they are presented opportunities to capitalize on the high earning potential in a formerly volunteer context? How might it be possible for directors to truly support player development amid increasing competitive, professional, and commercial pressures in Alberta youth hockey? I now introduce Bourdieu (1978), whose work provides the theoretical lens through which I look to understand how parents, coaches, and directors navigate the prolympic field of independent youth hockey in Alberta.

2.3 Bourdieu

Throughout his life and career, Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1978, 1984, 1990, 1998) introduced a variety of concepts including field, doxa, habitus, and capital, which I will use to analyze the social and environmental pressures on those involved in Alberta youth hockey. For Bourdieu, to understand social conditions and the resulting impacts on individuals and their behaviour, one needed to recognize how various forces and actors exist relative to each other (Schinkel, 2003). It would therefore be insufficient for me to outline the prolympic, corporate, and cultural pressures without also understanding how those pressures impact individuals' ways of thinking and behaving (Kim, 2018).

In addition to advantages of using Bourdieu's relational approach, Gartman (2013) highlights the ways in which "Bourdieu's theory also has a critical intent – it aims not merely to understand society but also to criticize and change it" (p. 33). In Bourdieu's later work, he was especially focused on using his position as a public intellectual to critique neoliberalism, a force he believed would lead to the continued reproduction of social hierarchies and inequalities, as well as the erosion of the autonomy of individuals and institutions (Schinkel, 2003). Bourdieu's

relational and critical approach guides this research as I seek to better understand how corporate pressures impact those involved in independent youth hockey in Alberta.

The examination of independent youth hockey can be strengthened by viewing it as a particular social field, a setting Giulianotti (2015) describes as "an objective construct which is constituted from the contested relations of different social actors" (p. 3). Indeed, independent youth hockey was produced through a host of contentions and disputes between different groups within Alberta minor hockey. As represented by the mapping and history of Hockey Canada throughout this dissertation, it is necessary to consider the social and historical forces that led to the emergence of independent youth hockey (Lincoln et al., 2011). In particular, perceptions of proper development, along with the ideologies of prolympism and the sport ethic, impact individuals' actions and decisions within Alberta youth hockey. Although Bourdieu (1978) described the field of sport as autonomous, the field of independent youth hockey was created to maximize the autonomy of interested individuals and bring their visions for youth hockey to life. Importantly, though, independent organizations have been tolerant of the forces of commercialization and professionalization described above, making them incredibly exclusive along the lines of social class (e.g., DeLuca & Andrews, 2016; Velija & Allen, 2024).

Perhaps more influential than corporate forces in limiting access to independent environments has been the requirement for individuals to adopt a particular habitus, a class-based disposition that matches the preferences of the group in question (Bourdieu, 1978). This leads me to consider the presence and impact of corporate pressures on the actors within the Alberta youth hockey context. For example, how do middle-class parents ensure they do not become overcommitted when the commercial ideology pushes them to spend more money and time to facilitate their child's involvement? What decisions are made by the coaches of a U13

independent hockey team that are influenced by their professional role in commercial or non-profit-organizations? How do directors balance their provision of developmental programs against the excessive demands of the sport ethic and the pressure to produce profit?

Bourdieu (1978) provides an early explanation of how social class can impact the type of sport in which people choose to participate, as those from upper classes have historically preferred less physical or intense physical pursuits to avoid subjecting their bodies to physical harm. With the emergence of the independent youth hockey field, it is therefore sensible for actors to use a combination of their interests, experiences, and values – which form their habitus – to make the decision to participate, usually a decision shared by other members of similar social class and status (Bourdieu, 1978; DeLuca & Andrews, 2016; Erez & Shoshana, 2023). Giulianotti (2015) describes the process in which individuals seek to participate in the activities that they perceive to be the best fit for them. This process of finding the "right fit" causes an almost inevitable reproduction of social values; as Hall et al. (2022) articulate, "habitus has been suggested to perpetuate itself into the future by previous exposure in similarly structured practices" (p. 389). This process of socialization is the primary method through which the habitus can be developed and strengthened within particular fields, and for particular classes (Cushion et al., 2003; Hall et al., 2022). For the current context, predispositions and tendencies produced through past competitive experiences are likely to contribute to individuals' development of a certain type of habitus that would match the one found in independent youth hockey (Erez & Shoshana, 2023).

In recent years, the middle-class sporting habitus has received much attention (e.g., DeLuca & Andrew, 2016; Velija & Allen, 2024), due in large part to the middle-class view that sport can be used as a vehicle for the development of well-balanced, socialized, and skilled

children (Erez & Shoshana, 2023). With increasingly stable economic positions in the middle class, and subsequent increases in spare time (Bourdieu, 1978), parents tend to fill that spare time with costly sporting commitments, even for children under five years of age (Velija & Allen, 2024). Lareau (2002) proposes a specific middle-class parenting strategy called concerted cultivation, where parents' active, intentional, and committed organization of their children's activities are thought to give them the best chance of optimal development. DeLuca and Andrews (2016) similarly describe how "many parents subscribe to an intensive form of parenting involving their children's participation in a variety of enriching activities, cultivation of multiple skill competencies, early exposure to formative experiences, and maximizing their potential in various ways" (p. 302). In the view of middle-class parents, concerted cultivation is a pathway that ensures their children will properly and effectively develop (e.g., Lareau, 2002; Velija & Allen, 2024). With overwhelming support from middle-class parents in Alberta, the field of independent youth hockey has grown rapidly for those with a similar disposition, one generally focused on helping children develop through highly structured sport that will equip young people with skills they need to thrive in a capitalist economy (Bourdieu, 1978; Brown, 2015; Lareau, 2002).

Along with the adoption of a certain habitus, a field also requires individuals to follow the field's doxa, the dominant, internalized governing principle (Giulianotti, 2015). Schubring et al. (2024) explain how a field's doxa is often representative of the goals and values of the broader society, exemplified by the manifestation of "democratic and social ideals in Swedish society which, in a wider field of play, shapes and legitimises democratic and less outcome-driven coaching" (p. 1971). With respect to coaching in North America, then, it is not surprising that North American neoliberal forces – commercialization, competition, and freedom (Brown,

2015; Jansen, 2020) – impact the doxa. While research on sport coaching has often explored the formation of coaching philosophies, typically organized around the goals of individual coaches (Ronkainen et al., 2018) based on their personal beliefs (Hall et al., 2022), the examination of a doxa more deeply considers the contextual, social, and relational factors that underpin coaches' beliefs and actions (Cushion & Jones, 2014). It is the understanding of these social factors that can help to better understand how, and why, coaches choose to act in certain ways (Denison et al., 2017; Suppiah et al., 2015).

According to Bourdieu (1977), many social interactions involve exchanges of capital, a form of power that influences those interactions through economic, cultural, social, and symbolic dimensions. Cushion and Jones (2014) provide a summary whereby capital is described as "economic (that which can be directly converted to money), cultural (such as education credentials), social (such as social position and connections), [and] symbolic (honour and prestige)" (p. 279). With this understanding of capital, it is evident that the opportunity to compete in independent youth hockey requires some starting capital, most significantly the economic capital required to access the setting in the first place (Bourdieu, 1978). Capital essentially works as the exchangeable currency for social interactions, through which it can be "transmitted, converted, and/or reproduced" (DeLuca & Andrews, 2016, p. 303). DeLuca and Andrews (2016), in their study of private pool membership, found that parents were content to pay the Valley View membership fees to give their children access to the privilege, power, and social connections afforded to members of the club. As described by the increasing commercialization of youth hockey in the previous sections, there is evidently space to further explore the exchanges of capital within the independent landscape (Giulianotti, 2015).

While Bourdieu extensively examined social class and culture, he was also particularly concerned about how an economic orientation – homo economicus – would continue to elevate market priorities and dominate social life (Schinkel, 2003). In fact, he calls homo economicus "une sorte de monster athropologique" (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 256), a sort of anthropologic monster. Brown (2015) further elaborates on *homo economicus* by explaining how individuals who begin operating according to economic principles are likely to sacrifice other goals related to citizenship or the public good. For an organization to show signs of increasing economic prioritization, then, is to sacrifice public and democratic values in the name of economic ones (Duncan, 2018; Jansen, 2020). Duncan (2018) describes how "the struggle for economic capital begins to define the relationships citizens share with each other and reaffirms that dominating influence of economic ideals across most fields of society" (p. 21).

It is evident that Bourdieu's work, along with the related works of Lareau (2002) and Brown (2015), offers an effective lens through which independent youth hockey in Alberta can be analyzed. As corporate pressures demand higher commitments within Alberta youth hockey, many benefits of sport participation – physical skills, friends, future opportunities – could be diminished, especially for marginalized or less affluent families (Richtel, 2023). Through this research, I look to avoid being blinded by my own positive experiences in sport to the point where I am afraid to be critical as "criticism is actually a form of commitment, a way of saying: 'If there are problems here … let's identify them and work to transform things to make sport better" (Sage, 1998, p. 12).

2.4 My Dissertation

The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of parents, coaches, and directors in youth hockey in Alberta, a field that has become increasingly dominated by

prolympic interests, corporate practices, and the sport ethic. To accomplish this goal within this complex setting, through my dissertation I ask the following research question: How do parents, coaches, and directors navigate and negotiate their participation in a prolympic field of hockey player development?

I seek answers to this question by first acknowledging my own positionality with respect to the topic. I am a white, male, middle-class hockey coach, and I had the immense privilege to participate in competitive youth hockey for over a decade before I joined the coaching ranks. Could this research have been conducted by a member of a marginalized community without hockey experience? Would six male coaches have agreed to be interviewed by a female researcher? Evidently, my own experiences as a player and coach afforded me a pronounced insider status in the context, where I was welcomed and trusted by participants (Mann, 2016). Especially with coaches – the participants with whom I related most closely – my interviews were friendly, casual, and well-received. Without the voice recorder on the table between us and my reminder to participants that I was conducting formal research interviews, passersby may have mistaken my interviews as conversations over coffee between friends. This, of course, leads me to acknowledge the potential limitations of this insider status, where the symmetry between the perspectives of my participants and I made it more challenging for me to be critical, forcing me to navigate blind-spots throughout the research process and to rely on my critical friends to maintain reflexivity (Mann, 2016; Smith & McGannon, 2018).

My experiences in hockey led me to volunteer opportunities, postsecondary education, and full-time employment. You may wonder, then, why I completed this critical research project on independent youth hockey. If I had such a positive experience in competitive youth hockey, should I not be excited for that opportunity to be offered to the next generation of youth hockey

players? Unfortunately, with the intensification of commitments to participate and the increasing prevalence of prolympic values, I struggle to remain optimistic that hockey will continue to offer these opportunities, and I am concerned that hockey will become even more exclusive for youth players across the province. My critique is, therefore, intended to support hockey participation for as many children as possible for years to come.

I adopted a critical approach to allow my research to provide "a critique that aimed to get to the root of things, one that challenge[s] dominant conceptions and provide[s] new points of departure for debate and new directions for analysis" (Gruneau, 1999, p. xix). Underpinning my critical approach is an ontology – nature of reality (Crotty, 1998) – of historical realism, which recognizes that while there is one single truth and reality, it is constantly negotiated through ideological, social, and political relations over time (Lincoln et al., 2011). Along with this ontological stance, I embrace a subjective epistemology – an understanding of how we come to learn about the truth in the world (Atkinson, 2011) – that aligns with a critical perspective.

To answer my overarching research question, I conducted three interview-based studies with parents, coaches, and directors active in Alberta's competitive youth hockey context, which aligned with my critical perspective by including participants in the process of knowledge creation and understanding how their experiences contribute to the current truth and understanding (Lincoln et al., 2011). I interviewed members of the hockey community who chose to participate in independent youth hockey because they pursued alternative contexts apart from those that were traditionally available, a decision that catapulted youth hockey into a developmental melee.

In my first study, I identify the roles, expectations, and pressures exerted on parents as they make decisions on behalf of their children in a privatized youth hockey environment

oriented toward the pursuit of player development. As parents are often expected to invest an excessive amount of time and finances to facilitate their child's participation with sport-related commitments nearly every day (Dorsch et al., 2020), I also explore how this creates numerous challenges for parents involved in sport. Through this study, I delve into the perspectives of youth hockey parents to better understand how they become involved in their child's development and how they make decisions regarding their children's opportunities for development in sport (Chard et al., 2015). Specifically, I consider how their parenting tends toward a strategy called concerted cultivation, which proposes that middle-class parents organize and schedule activities for their children so that they may actively and intentionally contribute to their children's positive development (Lareau, 2002), a practice which has intensified (Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016) with the introduction of independent youth hockey.

In my second study, I observe and interview coaches to explore the ways in which coaches are involved in player development and how they navigate hockey player development in these independent environments. In particular, I describe how coaches traverse the commercialized, professionalized, and prolympic sport system (Donnelly, 1996). As coaches are "inextricably linked to the social interaction in which they are embedded" (Jones & Corsby, 2015, p. 442), the influences of the social environment are a significant focus. Finally, I consider how the coaches' navigation of the context can be understood through Bourdieu's (1977) concepts of field, doxa, habitus, and capital, as coaches reinforce certain governing principles to an increasingly like-minded group of individuals (Cushion & Jones, 2014).

In my final study, I critically examine the views of current youth hockey directors to consider how they support development in privatized, prolympic settings. For directors, there are "pressures and increasingly sophisticated management practices that have driven associations,

leagues and clubs to identify, create and sustain a competitive advantage" (Shilbury, 2000, pp. 199-200). I begin by outlining these pressures of commercial and professional corporatization before discussing how this impacts the pursuit of player development in this particular social field (Bourdieu, 1998). As sport involvement continues to amplify in frequency and intensity even for young children (Waldron et al., 2020), I consider how early sport commitment may negatively affect the health and well-being of children and demonstrate how directors' willingness to accept overtraining and burnout risks on behalf of children may align with the sport ethic (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Finally, I describe the ways in which independent youth hockey invites a reorientation of the goals and relationships in the field by becoming more economically-oriented, through the lens of *homo economicus* (Brown; 2015).

Applying my critical lens through the sociological interrogation of the field of independent youth hockey in Alberta, I examine how prolympism and the sport ethic have become entrenched within youth hockey but at the same time how small acts of resistance remain a possibility (Mills, 2003). From my interviews with parents, coaches, and directors, I critique the ways in which these groups navigate prolympic and corporatized hockey development. More precisely, I consider how the independent youth hockey field sparked a transformation of behaviours for parents (concerted cultivation; Lareau, 2002), coaches (Bourdieu, 1977), and directors (homo economicus; Brown, 2015). Each of the following three chapters have been written as independent papers designed to stand alone. I complete this dissertation with a conclusion chapter that summarizes the key findings of each study, as well as implications, limitations, and future research directions.

3.0 Parenting with That "Extra Push": Concerted Cultivation and Youth Hockey Player Development

3.1 Introduction

Since the introduction of independent[14] youth hockey programs in 2017, a development that broke open the previously closed hockey system (Edwards, 2016), middle class and more affluent families in Alberta have been able to register their children in any program, of their choosing, in the province. These independent programs, which operate outside of the purview of Hockey Canada and Hockey Alberta, the game's traditional governing bodies (Brind'Amour & Renney, 2019), claim to offer "better development" for youth athletes (e.g., Airdrie Stars, 2023; Calgary Crusaders, 2023) and have successfully attracted nearly 10% of the approximately 65,000 youth players across the province (Underwood, 2019). Still, against this backdrop of heightened conditions of "consumer choice," little is known about how parents navigate these new independent hockey programs or about why they chose to enrol their children in them in the first place.

Indeed, Canadian minor hockey is a particularly contentious sport environment because it is notoriously competitive (Preston et al., 2021), tremendously demanding and expensive (Campbell & Parcels, 2013), and abuse of youth players in the form of physical assaults and verbal insults have been reported (Bean et al., 2016). Perhaps the most contentious aspect of youth hockey in Alberta is the question of whether, or how, it can remain a positive force in the lives of youth players and their families, a debate that forms the crux of this study. This is

[14] Many terms have been used to classify this new hockey context including non-sanctioned, private, and independent. The non-sanctioned and private labels were assigned by members of Hockey Canada to portray these leagues as unsupported and unregulated (Skilnick, 2017). I have chosen to use 'independent' in this paper at the request of several of my participants and because it appears to be a more neutral choice; I believe this will allow me to present a more balanced and nuanced case of youth hockey in Alberta.

especially salient considering the ways in which public and independent programs are increasingly defined by prolympic values of excellence and performance (Donnelly, 1996). The term "prolympism" refers to the adoption of professional values into traditionally Olympic (i.e., amateur) environments, and refers to competitive, outcome-focused, and exclusive sport contexts (Donnelly, 1996; Ingham et al., 1999; Ingham et al., 2002). Parents of youth athletes are important actors, as they are often ultimately responsible for choosing hockey programs for their children and supporting them throughout their experiences, on and off the ice. As a youth sport coach for over a decade, I have watched parents navigate struggles and successes in an increasingly complex competitive youth hockey environment.

Drawing from Annette Lareau (2002) – who applied Bourdieu's (1978) work on sport and social class specifically to parenting – I critically examine how middle-class parents navigate the tensions, contradictions, and increased demands (Hughes & Coakley, 1991) of their children's participation in independent minor hockey. In so doing, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge in the sociology of sport that examines the role of parents in the broader prolympic youth sport system (DeLuca & Andrews; Erez & Shoshana, 2023; Irwin & Elley, 2011; Lobinger et al., 2021; Misener, 2020; Mysko et al., 2022; Pynn, 2017; Velija & Allen, 2024). It also provides a unique perspective by including both mothers' and fathers' experiences of parenting in this context, the latter are generally excluded from parenting research (Velija & Allen, 2024; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016). And, while there has been important work examining sport participation and class backgrounds of Canadian families (Beamish, 2021), more research is needed to understand the rapid growth and acceptance of expensive and exclusive youth hockey environments in Alberta.

3.2 Parenting, Prolympism, and Class Reproduction Through Concerted Cultivation

In this literature review, I begin by outlining many of the challenges that parents encounter in competitive youth sport. Next, I describe the prolympic (i.e., expensive, exclusive, and competitive) qualities that further complicate the role of sport parents. Finally, I introduce concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2002) as the theoretical lens through which I look to understand parents' navigation of independent youth hockey in Alberta.

Parents are one of the most important and influential agents within the youth sport environment (Ingrell et al., 2020), although parents' roles in competitive youth sport are increasingly limited to those from middle- and upper-class backgrounds (DeLuca & Andrews, 2016; Gruneau, 1999). These socially and economically privileged parents have a direct role in influencing their children and their development, particularly as it relates to sport, as they are tasked with making decisions on behalf of their child (Ingrell et al., 2020) and are "ultimately responsible for their children's enrolment and participation" (Mysko et al., 2022, p. 3). Misener (2020) described how "parents are pivotal to the success of youth sport programming" (p. 329). For example, parents' decisions regarding the extent to which their children will participate in a sport greatly influence a child's developmental trajectory in sport (Li & Nauright, 2021). Parents may use sport to encourage their children to pursue personal benefits, strive to play professionally (Stefansen & Aarseth, 2011), or to seek an academic scholarship (Beamish, 2021). Unfortunately, these goals often lead parents to support higher sport commitments (Coutinho et al., 2016) and earlier sport specialization (Stegmann et al., 2021). Early specialization tends to be appeal to middle-class parents because of the misguided belief that their children will be disadvantaged if they do not get a head start as compared to other children (DiFiori et al., 2019).

As a result of their deep involvement, parents are often required to take on a significant, and growing, commitment themselves within current youth sport environments (Lobinger et al., 2021). Parents tend to accept these mounting responsibilities because they believe sport will help their children develop skills related to discipline, time management, and competitive drive (Beamish, 2021). Parents' growing role in sport may involve providing feedback or advice to their children (Ingrell et al., 2020), advocating for their children when they may have been treated unfairly (Preston et al., 2020), and supporting their children through challenging times like deselection (Neely et al., 2017). Parents are also required to meet demands such as paying team fees (Preston et al., 2021), driving their children to practices and games, and sacrificing their own free time to facilitate their child's participation (Cope et al., 2015). Additionally, they may fill team roles as a manager, treasurer, or assistant coach, highlighting the many ways that parents are involved in the youth sport environment (Pynn, 2017).

The motivation of some parents to ensure the child's participation in the youth sport environment may lie in the perception that they are being good parents (Coakley, 2007; Mysko et al., 2022; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016) by providing their children the opportunity to participate (Misener, 2020). Torres and López Frías (2023) noted that parents, in their attempts to be supportive, may inadvertently create so much pressure for young athletes that they end up "inhibiting performance, creating competitive stress, promoting antisocial behaviors, and increasing youth athlete dropout" (p. 92). Increasing parental involvement carries with it the potential of encouraging athletes to prioritize sport above other areas of life and recommending that athletes persevere to great extents when obstacles hinder their development (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). The most explicit demonstration of this prioritization are the resources of time and money that are invested in the development process (Preston et al., 2020). While parents

may justify their investment based on their children's development of positive personal values such as resilience and responsibility (Domingues & Gonçalves, 2013), more information is required to create a more fulsome understanding of this sporting landscape given the significant investment in youth hockey participation every year (Campbell & Parcels, 2013).

Coakley (2010) points toward privatization, commercialization, and the ambiguous role of family as contributors to the massive shift in the involvement of parents in youth sport. Pragmatically, the shift toward professional, commercial, prolympic sport leaves parents with little choice in the matter; they either elevate their involvement in sport, find a recreational league, or withdraw their children from sport altogether (Ingham et al., 2002). In the prolympic feeder system, parents and players are provided hope in the form of "false promise or false empowerments" (Ingham et al., 2002, p. 310) that center around the potential of achieving higher levels if only the parent and player commitment is sufficient. Considering that parents generally hold a positive view of sport and may have had positive youth sport experiences themselves, they often perceive it to be necessary to facilitate their children's participation (Wheeler & Green, 2019). Indeed, much of parents' support for competitive sport participation results from their efforts to "ensure that [their children] have the type of capital cultivating experiences likely to benefit them in later life" (DeLuca & Andrews, 2016, p. 302).

Parental contribution usually increases along with the level of competition (Edwards, 2016), especially as parents and players prepare for even higher levels of competition within the prolympic system (Ingham et al., 2002), often creating overwhelming pressure on youth due to substantial investments of time and money (Komotska & Sushko, 2022). Beyond the financial investment required of parents to facilitate their children's participation in youth ice hockey, there are also explicit sacrifices made by sporting families, which includes limited attention or

support offered to siblings who are not involved in sport (Cope et al., 2015). However, parents often view these investments and sacrifices as necessary to best equip their children for the future (Erez & Shoshana, 2023). This can be particularly problematic if parents view registration fees as investments that will pay off when their children receive a college scholarship or professional contract (Bean et al., 2016; Preston et al., 2021).

When parents focus exclusively on the advantages of sport participation (Velija & Allen, 2024), they may lose sight of potential risks, which include dropout, injury, or one-dimensionality (Cope et al., 2015). Not only do parents accept these risks on behalf of their children, but they may also encourage their children to do so, in the pursuit of positive results (Dohlsten et al., 2021; Vincent & Ball, 2007). While it is not always problematic to pursue improvement in sport or success in competition, commitment to sport should be questioned when it appears to display a lack of moderation or temperance (Hughes & Coakley, 1991).

Perhaps the most complex decision for parents is how to determine if competitive and independent youth hockey environments are developmentally appropriate environments for their children considering the risks of injury, overinvestment, and overtraining. As noted by Iachini et al. (2017), “not all of these programs are equally successful in promoting healthy development among participants” (p. 43). It is challenging for parents to find programs that can effectively support their children’s development (Mysko et al., 2022), amid the corporatization of youth sport that often demands a Herculean effort from parents to facilitate their child’s participation. However, Coakley (2015) explained that there is a “nearly unshakable belief in the inherent purity and goodness of sport” (p. 403) and this perspective works to sustain parents’ commitment to youth sport, even as it continues its current trajectory towards fully professionalized and commercialized processes. Parents may contradict their good intentions and perpetuate the view

of an inherently positive sport environment when they ignore the health risks of competition (Black et al., 2021; Kerr et al., 2023) or when they choose to participate in an unfair system of youth sport rather than speak against it (Torres & López Frías, 2023).

The role of parents in sport is increasingly complex, as it is their responsibility to evaluate and select experiences that will offer their children the benefits typically associated with sport, such as enjoyment, social skills, and confidence (Irwin & Elley, 2011; Knight, 2019; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016). However, sociological researchers have established that parents are looking to imbue short-term, personal, and individual benefits in their children, and that they also hope to reproduce in their children middle-class values that will maintain their social privilege and increase the likelihood of their upward mobility (e.g., DeLuca & Andrews, 2016; Erez & Shoshana, 2023; Lareau, 2002; Wheeler, 2018).

3.2.1 Theoretical Framework – Concerted Cultivation

As the middle-class sporting habitus in North America increasingly prioritizes commercial, professional, and prolympic values (Beamish, 2021; Donnelly, 1996; Kidd & McFarlane, 1972), parents have become more tolerant of the increased costs and demands of facilitating their children's involvement in sport, due in large part to the perceived social and cultural benefits stemming from their children's participation (Beamish, 2021). This comes with consequences for parents, as the changing landscape of youth sport requires them to adopt more intense forms of parenting to match the habitus (DeLuca & Andrews; Irwin & Elley, 2011; Velija & Allen, 2024). Vincent and Ball (2007) explain how the "social reproduction of the middle-class family [is] no longer perceived as certain as [it] perhaps once [was]. The anticipation of an objective future is fraught with anxieties and risks. Here then calculation, improvisation and invention are to the fore" (p. 1074).

Lareau (2002) captures this behaviour using the concept of concerted cultivation, which proposes that middle-class parents will register their children in "numerous, age-specific, organised activities that dominate family life and create enormous labour, particularly for mothers. Parents view these activities as transmitting life skills to children" (Vincent et al., 2012, p. 431). Concerted cultivation encourages parents to seek optimal development (Shih & Yi, 2014) and social advantage (Vincent et al., 2012) through intentional planning and programming (Velija & Allen, 2024). Within the concerted cultivation parenting strategy, parents will justify their increasing investments and commitments as necessary steps toward equipping their children for future success in the middle class habitus (Irwin & Elley, 2011; Stefansen & Aarseth, 2011; Wheeler, 2018). With significant investments of time, energy, and money required to participate, examining parental commitment through the lens of concerted cultivation can help shed light on why parents are so willing to accept the demands of independent youth hockey.

To better understand the signs of social reproduction in youth development (Wheeler & Green, 2019), the sport ethic – the understanding that success in sport should come by sacrificing, striving, accepting risks, and refusing limits (Hughes & Coakley, 1991) – is also particularly relevant. Parents may adopt the principles of the sport ethic in similar ways to athletes because of the enduring view of sport as positive, and because sport can be used to reproduce a middle-class habitus (Beamish, 2021; DeLuca & Andrews, 2016). As parents' support for extreme commitment in the name of player development increases, it is necessary to understand the values parents promote for their children (Bourdieu, 1978). The sport ethic and concerted cultivation are intimately linked to the current context as "concerted cultivation is part of an intensification of parenting" (Vincent & Maxwell, 2016, p. 273).

Many scholars agree that more research in youth sport needs to involve parents (e.g., Domingues, & Gonçalves, 2013; Witt & Dangi, 2018), as "parents face an abundance of stressors throughout their child's development in sport" (Preston et al., 2020, p. 143). A greater understanding of how and why parents act in sport (Lareau, 2002; Misener, 2020) is needed, especially within the intense field (Hughes & Coakley, 1991) of competitive independent youth hockey in Alberta. The purpose of this study is to examine why parents choose to participate in, and support, a commercialized, professionalized, and demanding independent youth hockey field, and how they navigate this terrain. Specifically, this study attends to the question: How do parents of youth hockey players navigate the tensions, contradictions, and increased demands of their children's participation in independent minor hockey?

3.3 Method

I engaged a critical perspective (Markula & Silk, 2011) in this study to understand the ways in which parents are influenced and pressured to act. This research is significant, as parents are often portrayed as culpable for (Barreiros et al., 2013; Chard et al., 2015; DiFiori et al., 2017), or woefully uninformed about (Pelletier & Lemoyne, 2020), issues in the youth sport environment. Using Lareau's concept of concerted cultivation (2002), I applied a critical sociological perspective to consider how class backgrounds, as well as social and cultural experiences, influence or dictate parent behaviour. A critical perspective supports my interrogation of parents' perceptions of the highly commercial and professional transformation of Alberta's developmental youth hockey environments and my understanding of the social and contextual pressures associated with their involvement.

3.3.1 Participants

For this research, I recruited 12 parents from the Premier Hockey League (PHL, n=2), the Hockey Super League (HSL, n=7), and the Junior Prospects Hockey League (JPHL, n=3), the newest and most contentious youth hockey context in Alberta. Parents of 11–15-year-old male youth hockey players who currently or recently participated (i.e., within the last year), in independent or non-sanctioned programs in Alberta comprised the purposeful, criterion-based sample (Patton, 2002). While it was not the goal of this research to locate differences in experience related to class, race, or gender, an effort was made to recruit equitably where possible, which resulted in the recruitment of six mothers and six fathers who mostly identified as white (10 of 12) for the study (Wong & Dennie, 2021). Participants held a variety of occupations in education, human resources, and business, many of which required additional education, training, and experience, and provided parents the potential for economic stability and social mobility characteristic of the middle-class (Irwin & Elley, 2011). Many parents also had flexible work schedules that allowed them to better manage the demands of independent youth hockey; most were also from two-parent households, allowing them to divide the labour of both parenting and providing (Vincent et al., 2012). It was clear throughout interviews that parents from lower socioeconomic statuses would not have been able to participate in independent youth hockey given the exceedingly expensive nature of the sport (Riehl et al., 2019), as even middle-class families struggled to keep up with the growing costs and demands (Beamish, 2021).

3.3.2 Data Collection

I used semi-structured interviews to allow for the generation of meaningful personal content, as well as deeper consideration of "people's personal perspectives and experiences"

(Patton, 2002, p. 40).[15] Mann (2016) further indicated that "interviews are widely held to be a fundamentally useful way to understand informants' beliefs, experiences, and worlds" (p. 2). Like other studies in sport research involving parents (e.g., Wolfenden & Holt, 2005), semi-structured, individual interviews offered participants the opportunity to explain how their actions and decisions are impacted within the youth hockey context. To increase the accessibility of the research study, I provided participants with the option to participate in-person, through Zoom, or through a phone call: eight participants elected to meet for in-person interviews, three participants chose to meet on Zoom, and one participant preferred to set up a phone call. The conversational nature of interviews allowed participants to share the most relevant aspects of their experience and expand on those details that were most important to them and their lived experience (Patton, 2002). Interviews lasted from 34 to 73 minutes (average = 54 minutes). All interviews were audio-recorded. I also took notes during the process of data collection to reflect on the generation of data and to encourage reflexivity as the research progresses (Patton, 2002).

3.3.3 Interview Guide

A comprehensive interview guide was created through an extensive review of relevant literature and piloted with three individuals – all parents with children in Alberta minor hockey – before any interviews were conducted. The questions primarily invited conversation about topics related to development (Edwards, 2016), commercialization (Taylor & Garratt, 2010), professionalization (Dowling et al., 2014), and the sport ethic (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). The interview questions allowed me to explore how parents understand development and why they chose to pursue development for their children within commercialized and professionalized independent youth hockey in Alberta. Interview responses provided information regarding

[15] This research has been approved by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board under Pro00134273.

parental expectations within youth hockey and highlighted the pressures experienced by parents to act in certain ways. A complete draft of the interview guide for parents is attached (Appendix A).

3.3.4 Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and analysis was conducted according to a recently introduced 7-step process (Markula et al., 2023). Step 1 of this process involved copying and pasting interview responses from all interviewees into a consolidated section for each question, making it easy to review one question at a time. In practice, I found that some interview questions and responses overlapped with each other, so I identified eight relatively distinct categories and organized the data according to those categories. In Step 2, I identified "common themes in their interview answers for each question" (Markula et al., 2023, p. 7). Themes in this step were considered meaningful according to several criteria, including concepts that are often repeated, ideas that appeared problematic or contradictory, as well as ideas that appeared to be missing from the conversation (Boyatzis, 1998); a total of 82 initial themes were identified in Step 2. Step 3 involved comparing and condensing the list of themes in each section with the broader themes (Markula et al., 2023) of development, commercialization, and professionalization. At the end of this step, 11 working themes were identified. In Step 4, I developed three main themes, along with three sub-themes, by cross-referencing themes in each section with the themes generated in all other reviewed sections. Step 5 initiated the writing process, where I integrated my themes with participant quotations. In Step 6, I connected my themes to properly locate my research within the bodies of sport literature about development, parents, and youth sport participation. Finally, Step 7 involved a deeper connection with theory, where I drew more heavily on sociocultural literature,

with particular emphasis on habitus, concerted cultivation, and the sport ethic, to extend my research and to apply a critical perspective where possible.

3.3.5 Quality Standards

Several approaches were employed to ensure the quality of this research. First, pilot interviews were conducted to ensure the accuracy and suitability of the questions for research participants (Mayan, 2009). Second, field notes were taken during the research – particularly after each interview – to act as both an audit trail (Finlay, 2006) and a method of reflexivity (McGannon et al., 2021). Participants were also given a two-week opportunity to review their interview transcripts to ensure the interview data accurately represented their beliefs and experiences. Two participants modified their interview transcript, with several more asking for intimate stories or details to be struck completely from the record. I also engaged a committee of critical friends to offer different perspectives and provide feedback on the research (Smith & McGannon, 2018), from the early planning stages all the way through the final stages of writing, encouraging both reflection and reflexivity throughout the research process.

3.4 Findings and Discussion

I identified three major themes through data analysis with one sub-theme within each major theme. The first theme, ‘balancing the budget’, outlines the commitment and demands required for parents to facilitate their children’s sport participation, as well as their initial perceptions of their commitment. The second theme, ‘we want more’, provides parents’ perceptions of the practical details that draw them to independent youth hockey. Finally, the third theme, ‘the kid has a spark’, details how parents justify, defend, and advocate for their transition to independent youth hockey. These themes and sub-themes, along with connections to literature and theory, are presented below.

3.4.1 Balancing the Budget

Parents unanimously highlighted the high financial costs of participating in independent youth hockey. Keith joked, "you probably just want to chop off your arms and give them to the team because it's gonna cost you an arm and a leg for sure." When determining the total costs required to facilitate their children's participation, the highest amount was approximately $15,000 per year, which included all programming, transportation, accommodation, food, and education costs (Derek).[16] While the cost of other programs ranged from $3,000 (Sean) to $5,000 (Taylor), these programs also required parents to pay for travel and accommodation. Kylee estimated that for all expenses "last year, the 2022-23 season, we had spent almost $7,000." Other parents shared that they would spend as much as $1,000 (Ava) or $1,200 (Keith) per month on fuel to drive their child to hockey. Velija and Allen (2024) highlighted that, with concerted cultivation, planned activities are almost inevitably viewed as worthwhile because they showcase parents' efforts to arrange valuable activities for their children, an understanding expressed by numerous parents in the study.

In addition to the financial commitments, parents also shared that independent youth hockey participation represented a significant demand on their time, represented by the need to "save up my personal days, and my personal days are used to get to hockey" (Sydney) or being forced to "plan family vacations around hockey" (Taylor). When combined with busy practice and game schedules, Kylee said she "feels like we don't have much of a social life." Ava added that her husband "never gets to be at home." The time associated with transporting children to their extra-curricular activities is a clear sign of the value parents place on these activities,

[16] This program represents the typical costs for a player in the Junior Prospects Hockey League (JPHL), which operates across Alberta and British Columbia at the U14, U15, U17, and U18 levels. Only parents whose children participated in the U14 and U15 age categories were interviewed in this research.

although high commitments may inadvertently cause disconnection or disagreement between parents (Wheeler & Green, 2019)

While it is not new that the costs and time associated with competitive youth sport are significant (Misener, 2020), many participants were quick to express value in the time and money spent on hockey participation. Madison explained that, although the costs were high, she felt better that "you know where every dollar goes. I mean, we could pull it up. Whereas in minor hockey, you know, you pay to this big organization, you sort of get a budget, but it's a little cloudy." Some parents viewed costs as "an investment, whether for a long-term investment or short-term investment, you're investing in your kid's future. But how much money are you willing to spend at the end of the day? A lot of money" (Evelyn). Wheeler and Green (2019) discussed how this view of registration fees as an investment is common in parents of higher social classes and how concerted cultivation—structured and intentional parenting intended to equip middle-class children for the future—encourages parents to "have their children involved in organised activities on a regular basis" (p. 793). Keith knew there were less expensive programs to consider, but also felt he was paying for the alignment between his child's passion and a higher level of play, while also cultivating in his child the behaviours necessary to compete at a higher level (Wheeler & Green, 2019). He explained, "I think it's right for the right kid, and I think people know if their kid needs that extra push, needs that extra development because that's where their passion is, to go to the next level."

Some parents mentioned they would pay even more, especially when they considered the alternatives. Carter, whose son played in the JPHL, explained:

> I paid 14 grand this year – I think what we get for $14,000 and like NAX[17] is $30,000. Where's the extra $16,000 dollars? What are they getting? Where's the difference between the [Canadian Sport School Hockey League] schools that pay $50,000? I don't see where they're getting more of anything. The value is huge. If they came back and said it's gonna be 17 or 18. What's 3 or 4 more grand?

Claire, whose son had previously played minor hockey, recalled, "when you get to that level, you're paying the fees just to get into club, then the budgets are outrageous just for the team. All hockey families will pay, you find a way to pay." The willingness to spend even more on hockey participation lines up with Wheeler and Green's (2019) research that indicated "middle-class parents having a greater amount of disposable income to spend on the cultivation of their children" (p. 798). However, increased parental commitment also carries with it the potential of reinforcing tenets of the sport ethic by encouraging them to prioritize sport above other areas of life (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). For example, Evelyn suggested that they may need to "be willing to remortgage our house, basically, right. But I mean, if it's what he wants to do, then we'll support him as far as he wants to go." Taylor went so far as to say, "I know people that have taken out RRSPs, put on additional debt, lines of credit to pay for that." Parents viewed sport participation as worth the costs because of the skills and abilities cultivated in their children (Vincent et al., 2012), even though parents' acceptance of those costs could result in some parents risking their own financial security.

Not all parents paid the fees without deep consideration. For example, Ava shared her sense of doubt explaining that "the cost seems excessive to me. The price tag of this stuff is honestly insane. But they're your kids and so you just do it." Aligned with the findings of Irwin

[17] NAX (Northern Alberta Xtreme) is a Hockey Canada sanctioned team in the Canadian Sport School Hockey League.

and Elley (2011), parents aimed to provide the best opportunities for their children but had to make difficult decisions about how to accomplish that goal. Keith critiqued:

> I think it is outrageous what people are paying. I think it's kind of funny when the argument is like – OK, if you play in these, you're on the path to get a full ride scholarship to an NCAA team. Well, you're prepaying, right? Like you're just paying for school hoping that's going to be the case. The free full ride is kind of laughable to me.

3.4.1.1 The Cost of a Quality Coach

The primary reason why participants said they paid extra for independent hockey programs was to access what they perceived to be higher-quality coaching. Taylor appreciated how the coaches have been "more lenient with the kids and they're developmentally more nurturing, more like teachers." Several participants, such as Kylee, noted that "coaches don't sugarcoat it for the kids." In other words, coaches brought a higher degree of intensity and accountability to the practice environment, which parents appreciated, and also provided an 'educational' environment. Travis noted this was evidence that "[the coach] is investing in my kid." By seeking coaches who would support and challenge their children, parents advanced their quest to cultivate positive values in their children like dedication and work ethic (Vincent & Maxwell, 2016).

Parents also valued the significant commitment from the coaches in independent hockey. As Carter highlighted: "that's his job – they're gonna be practicing eight hours a week – the development is through the roof." This professionalization that ensured "continuity of coaches, year after year" (Taylor) was highly regarded by parents. It was also clear, however, that higher expectations and paid, professional coaching began to influence parents' views of what would most likely lead to success. For example, Evelyn believed, "for your kid to get to a higher level,

or playing sports when they go to university or get scholarships – starting earlier is better… it's because it really develops the mindset." Evidently, parents were conditioned – whether through marketing or messaging – to engage in concerted cultivation as early as possible, which they believe will prepare their children for success in the future (Velija & Allen, 2024). This is especially powerful if parents feel that their children's time spent outside of planned activities will cause them to fall behind in acquiring different forms of capital (Shih & Yi, 2014).

3.4.2 We Want More

While the increasing demands of youth sport need to be problematized (Denison et al., 2017), parents tended to fully accept the demands of independent youth hockey. This was based largely on tangible and pragmatic details related to scheduling and team structure, which eased some of their burdens of participation. Many parents highlighted how "it's been the first year of hockey since he started that we actually have a set schedule… it was a game changer for us and certainly made life a lot easier" (Keith). In densely populated communities, high demands on ice time means that teams may receive inconsistent ice times week after week, or schedules are released with limited notice. On one hand, parents of children on independent teams have the benefit of "knowing our schedule for the whole entire year. For community, you don't know what your schedule is gonna be next week" (Evelyn). On the other hand, predictable schedules align with concerted cultivation in the sense that parents were able to schedule even more activities for their children (Velija & Allen, 2024). As Vincent et al. (2012) explained, concerns of overscheduling are typically balanced against the understanding that "activities are discursively positioned as a 'good' thing. They are widely viewed as a key part of a 'good' childhood" (p. 433).

The structure of independent programs was also incredibly appealing to parents; the HSL, for example, "says you're supposed to have 80 hours of skill development [per winter season] and that's a mandate you're supposed to meet" (Sean). Claire felt independent hockey has offered "way more development, just because I feel there's more ice time, there's more stuff, the speed was better." Travis shared, "it does make you proud that the kids are getting that kind of experience – maybe that's just me justifying the cost." It appeared that the longer families were involved in independent hockey, the more supportive they became of heavily investing in the future of their children, a clear connection to middle-class approaches to childrearing (Irwin & Elley, 2011). Especially in the JPHL, which is a league that includes 10-month daily programming integrated with the school day, parents generally appreciated the "cohesive model. These kids do school in the morning, go straight to the arena for their skating, then straight for a workout. Then they come home. Every single evening at home is ours" (Claire). As much as parents increased their investments of time and money (Wheeler, 2018), parents expressed that the additional financial expenses could be tolerated if it freed up time for their families to spend together.

3.4.2.1 Why We Left

A primary reason why parents left minor hockey initially was their disagreement with the developmental change Hockey Canada introduced for the 2017-18 season, which was mandated half-ice hockey[18] for U9 players and under (Hockey Canada, 2023a). The transition to half-ice hockey was presented by Hockey Canada (2023a) as a massive developmental advantage, resulting in twice as many puck touches, six times more shot attempts, three times

[18] In 2017, Hockey Canada introduced mandatory half-ice hockey for players U9 and under. To accomplish this transition, barriers or temporary boards are used to split the ice surface in half and two cross-ice games can take place at the same time. This was proposed to not only increase player engagement but also to increase the number of ice sessions that each team could receive in a season.

more shots on goal, two times more passes, and five times more passes received when compared to full-ice hockey at the same level. However, parents did not feel that half-ice hockey could fulfill their expectations of how their children should develop or equip them with the skills needed to succeed at a higher level (Velija & Allen, 2024). Sean described his and his son's experience as participants in half-ice hockey:

> Whatever Hockey Canada was doing in theory probably made sense to them. I don't think it was very well thought or communicated, and I was part of it. It was chaos. Everybody was freaking out… There's nothing to teach. It's, go out and chase the puck around. My kid could skate really good, and everyone's yelling pass, and he'd cry. He'd ask me, why does everybody keep yelling pass? I'd be like, I don't know buddy, just do your best.

Several other parents agreed with Sean's perception of the limitations of half-ice hockey. Derek shared, "you can't practice kids like him on half-ice. There's no way because he's just not gonna get better. It does hold them back, right?" The timing of the surge in independent hockey teams coincided with Hockey Canada's half-ice mandate and parents' desire to cultivate the potential of their children led them to take an active role in choosing the setting for their children's participation (Stefansen & Aarseth, 2011).

Parents also chose to leave minor hockey because they perceived those involved in it were not accountable to provide a quality program and experience for their children. When parents adopt the concerted cultivation parenting style, they tend to take "responsibility for the child's development" (Vincent et al., 2012, p. 430), which requires them to assess the suitability of programs toward the goal of developing their children. Taylor explained that in independent hockey, "you must run a good program with a good culture or people will leave. Whereas you can do whatever you want in minor hockey. Even with the biggest pain in the ass parents, they

kind of have to take you." From a different perspective, Sydney explained that many parents interested in independent hockey had kids who previously played on lower-level teams and were "disgruntled about their kids not getting the same development chances as tier one teams." In either case, parents' decisions in youth hockey seemed to be impacted by their desire to be active agents and meaningful investors in raising their children (Vincent et al., 2012; Wheeler & Green, 2019).

Parents provided many reasons why they would not return to the minor hockey system. Taylor, for example, "felt like I was guaranteed a great season [by participating in independent hockey]. That was worth something. And I don't think most people in minor hockey can say they've never had a bad year." For some parents, the professionalism of coaches was the determining factor, as "for minor hockey, it's just like, we show up on Tuesday at a rink across the city for an hour and usually the parent coach just runs some drills they download off the Hockey Canada app" (Sean). For others, it was the quality of the players in minor hockey, with "a big range between some really good players and not so good players. And they all happened to be on the same team" (Keith). Velija and Allen (2024), in their sociological analysis of concerted cultivation in under-5 sport programs, described how parents "can buy into a perceived advantage through activities that reassures them they will enable their child to be advanced compared to others" (p. 11). Along with capitalizing on a potential advantage (Vincent et al., 2012), there were also complex emotions surrounding the decision to stay in independent hockey; As Sean shared, "there's this, kind of unwritten fear mongering about, if you go back [to public hockey] to try out, no matter how good you do, you're not going to make it." For parents who have not yet joined independent hockey, it may be important to understand that some parents view the transition as a one-way door.

3.4.3 The Kid Has a Spark

Perhaps the most powerful influence on parents' acceptance of the demands of independent hockey was their perception that it aligned with the love of the game that their children possessed. Ava described how "I could see this spark in my kid, and I'm like, OK, this is where he needs to be, because some kids get pushed by their peers, right? They want to, they're competitive and want to be the best." For some parents, this seemed to align with their own love of the game. Keith reminisced on his own participation on the backyard rink, "I had an old straight wooden stick, and I just wore that grass like completely off. You know, imagination. Just thought I was in the NHL, and I wanted to play so bad." Keith and Sydney described how they would build a rink in their backyards to provide another chance for their children to play consistently. The deliberate nature of parents' facilitation of hockey involvement certainly matches parenting from a perspective of concerted cultivation as parents nurture and protect their children, thereby avoiding the passivity associated with low parenting effort (Vincent & Maxwell, 2016).

Passion for sport – for both parents and players – seemed to be one of the most influential factors in strengthening the perceived need to include organized activities in their children's schedule (Wheeler & Green, 2019). As Derek, whose son was 14 years old, explained:

> I want to keep on pushing hard. So, we got a goal in mind. He wants to keep progressing in hockey, but you can't take a lot of time off and just keep going. You got to push hard now. And the next few years are really crucial. So yeah, we're gonna push him and see what he's got.

Wheeler (2018) explained how, within concerted cultivation, "a central dilemma for middle-class parents was how much to push their children" (p. 336). Travis outlined his worry "about wearing

out my kids. And it's such a business that's come down lower and lower." Travis further elaborated that the increasing prevalence of player agencies, spring hockey teams, and early tryouts force him and his son to increase their commitments to sport. Evelyn described how "when they started HSL, we thought it was a little too much. It's a matter of getting used to it." She later cast doubt on this assessment by sharing that by "playoffs, you can tell the kids are getting a bit, you know, the energies not there. So, finding the right balance regarding the ice time and all that. They get what they call the February blues." Parents' perceptions of risks in independent hockey are influenced by their desires to be good parents (Coakley, 2011) who are capable of planning busy and productive childhood experiences (Wheeler, 2018). As there is a fine line between appropriate competition and increasing pressures to perform, parents must not "lose sight of the fundamental goals for youth sport" (Pynn, 2017, p. 21) by emphasizing competitive goals too fervently. This is especially the case for parents with high perceptions of their child's ability, who may use their child's potential to justify increased participation (Knight, 2019).

3.4.3.1 Focused on the Positives

A main parental justification for registering their children in independent youth hockey programs was the surplus of personal and professional capital that their children could use to leverage better life, education, and employment arrangements in the future (Velija & Allen, 2024; Wheeler & Green, 2019). For example, Carter shared that "what [my son] is learning today is going to stay with him. When he gets a job, when he becomes a father, gets married; what is going on with these guys are lessons going to stay with them for life." Parents highlighted a variety of benefits for their children, including "those intangibles, like they work harder" (Taylor), "improvements in school" (Derek), "how to handle disappointment and success"

(Sydney), and "accountability, responsibility, and a team environment" (Travis). The perceived benefits regarding personal development through sport (Camiré, 2015; Irwin & Elley, 2011) included perceptions of hockey "making him a better person" (Derek).

While parents mostly discussed the personal benefits that could be cultivated through participation in sport (Vincent & Maxwell, 2016), they were also confident that better development in independent programs would result in improved competitive outcomes for their children. The addition of competitive priorities solidified the connection between concerted cultivation and the sport ethic (Lareau, 2002; Hughes & Coakley, 1991): parents not only accepted demanding schedules for their children but also affirmed their willingness to go the extra mile because of the competitive context. Evelyn, for example, specified that "if I wanted my kids to just play for fun, sure, community might be the best thing for them and not spend the money. But if they wanted more of a competitive level…they could get to a higher level." Many parents, including Derek, Taylor, and Kylee, stressed the positive commitment and dedication to competitive play that was required in independent youth hockey. Ava felt "when you put your kids into competitive sports, you kind of almost expect that intensity to kind of be a little bit more."

While parents predominantly accepted the demands of independent youth hockey, some participants, when asked to reflect on their overall experience, balanced the conversation with a more tempered perspective. Keith, for example, was critical of the increasing length of hockey seasons as he felt that "putting the equipment down and taking some time away from hockey is also a benefit that people are overlooking at this point." Claire described her evolving expectations of college or university hockey participation, recognizing that very few athletes will have the opportunity to play at a university level. Travis expressed that he tried not to "look too

far ahead, then you make decisions that might be clouded." Keith also encouraged parents to remember, "if you're good, it doesn't matter where you're gonna play, they're gonna find you." Keith felt that this perspective would help parents find some balance in their parenting approach, which could alleviate the pressure and expectations for parents to facilitate the upward movement of their children in the prolympic system (Ingham et al., 2002).

3.5 Conclusion

In this study, I sought to critically investigate how parents navigated the tensions, contradictions, and demands to facilitate their children's independent youth hockey participation. While parents acknowledged the extra costs required to participate, the perceived value of independent programs and their children's love for the game encouraged them to stay committed to independent youth hockey. Using Lareau's (2002) concerted cultivation, I explained how parents' willingness to accept higher demands for a quality program come from the privilege of their middle-class standing, an important factor for the growth of independent youth hockey in Alberta.

The interview data revealed a fundamental coherence of the independent youth hockey environment with the reproduction of a middle-class values through concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2002) and the sport ethic (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). In other words, parents typically agreed with, and supported, the increased cost and time demands in independent youth hockey. While there were exceptions, high costs and increased demands of participation were largely thought to be worthwhile (Hughes & Coakley, 1991) due in large part to the players' love of the game and parents' desire to facilitate positive, planned, programming for their children (Wheeler, 2018). The implications of this alignment are twofold: first, parents are likely to continue searching for independent youth hockey teams that match their perceptions of high-

quality programs; second, they are unlikely to problematize their own commitment as they overwhelmingly accepted high costs and demands. Future research could investigate how parents can find balance when pushing to prepare their children (Lareau, 2002) or pursue an understanding of parenting in different sports or cultures (Shih & Yi, 2014).

There are two primary limitations of this research project. First, the participants were recruited from a total of eight different teams within five divisions of the PHL, HSL, and JPHL. Due to this variability, specific recommendations for a specific independent youth hockey context could not be provided. Second, the study has used a relatively small sample size (n=12) considering that more than 12 parents are likely to be involved for each of the nearly 300 teams in independent youth hockey in Alberta. However, this study has meaningfully contributed to the academic literature related to parenting in sport. Future studies could examine specific ways to support parents as they navigate an increasingly complex youth sport landscape.

4.0 Understanding "The Buy In" with Bourdieu: Coaching for Performance in a Prolympic Hockey System

4.1 Introduction

Over the past three decades, youth sport has been increasingly transformed into a costly, performance-based, competitive, and demanding prolympic[19] system, one that has altered the expectations and experiences of parents and players alike (Camiré, 2015; Côté et al., 2007; Cushion & Jones, 2014). As a coach of youth athletes for most of the last 15 years, I have had a front-row seat to observe the ways in which these changes have taken hold in Alberta youth hockey. Youth hockey in Alberta is an increasingly complex, competitive, and demanding environment for coaches. They are required to continually guide individual athletes (and their middle-class parents) towards excellence, while balancing individual and team needs, their own career aspirations, and the challenges of advancing players to higher levels (Ingham et al., 2002). These developments, especially the pressures to win and to develop "winners"—to propel young people to become part of an elite athletic labour force—have simultaneously pushed coaches to tolerate, accept, and support professional and commercial approaches to coaching, including embracing specialized training, and year-round competition (Decosse & Norcliffe, 2020; Donnelly, 1996).

All these practices and pressures have become even more pronounced in Alberta youth hockey since 2017, when independent[20] youth hockey programs began operating outside of the

[19] Intense dedication to sport improvement has been described using a concept that combines 'professionalism' and 'Olympism' in a term called prolympism (Donnelly, 1996). See Ingham et al. (2002) for a comprehensive description of the exclusionary, outcome-focused, and exploitative trends that accompany the prolympic movement.

[20] Many terms have been used to classify this new hockey context including non-sanctioned, private, modern, and independent. I have chosen to use 'independent' in this paper at the request of several of my participants and because it appears to be the most neutral choice; I believe this will allow me to present a balanced and nuanced case of youth hockey in Alberta.

purview of Hockey Canada and Hockey Alberta, the game's traditional governing bodies (Brind'Amour & Renney, 2019). While players in traditional minor hockey environments are required to play on teams within the residential boundaries of a closed system (Edwards, 2016), players and families in independent youth hockey are free agents: they participate in an open system without restrictions, where they simply pay-to-play where they like across the province.[21] Professional youth hockey coaches – now free agents themselves, in many ways – are vital to the success and profitability of independent youth hockey teams. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they advocate that they can offer "better developmental opportunities" in these new independent leagues, usually accomplished through higher time commitments, additional costs, and even more competition to further prepare players to ascend the hierarchical prolympic structure, in which most players inevitably fail (Ingham et al., 2002).

All these developments raise numerous questions. How do coaches navigate the broader prolympic system dominated by commercial player development pressures and agendas? Does this potentially raise ethical dilemmas and conflicts of interest in their roles and capacities in working with young people? Coaches often benefit professionally and financially by pushing young athletes to embrace even more expansive and expensive training and playing regimes, which are not always healthy practices for young players (Taylor & Garratt, 2010). Unfortunately, "adults, whether as parents or coaches, tend to get carried away with their own agendas rather than providing a positive opportunity for skill development, success, and enjoyment for all participants" (De Knop et al., 1996, p. 35). Are there moments where coaches can push back, individually or collectively, against the pressures of prolympism? Sport has great

[21] Competition with independent youth hockey organizations, and declining registration in minor hockey due to residency-based requirements, have pushed Hockey Alberta to consider removing their residency-based requirements, a decision likely to be made later in 2025 (Chini, 2024).

potential to benefit both players and coaches, but further investigation is necessary to determine how coaches navigate the complex field of independent youth hockey, and how they make certain decisions about player development that may encourage unhealthy levels of athlete commitment and exploitation (Coakley, 2007).

Drawing from semi-structured interviews and participant observation, this paper critically analyzes the ways in which youth hockey coaches in Alberta navigate the competitive prolympic field of independent minor hockey. In so doing, I contribute to work in the sociology of sport on youth sport and sport coaching, and to the growing body of sport research using concepts introduced by Pierre Bourdieu (1977). To date, there has been very little analysis or critique of the role of coaches in the independent prolympic system (i.e., Morton, 2022), one that increasingly resembles a "private, restricted cultural field serving to valorize and reinforce the practices and processes reproducing [middle-class families'] social class status" (DeLuca & Andrews, 2016, p. 310).

To accomplish these aims, I begin by outlining Bourdieu's concepts of doxa, habitus, capital, and field in relation to coaching Alberta independent youth hockey. Bourdieu's concepts (1977, 1984, 1990) have been effectively used by sociologists of sport to analyze the experience of athletes and coaches in parasport (Townsend & Cushion, 2021; 2022), national-level athletes from private schools (Morton, 2022), the process of formalised coach education (Leeder & Cushion, 2020; Webb & Leeder, 2022), and the professionalization of Swedish sport (Schubring et al., 2024). While there is a growing body of Bourdieusian research on sport coaching (e.g., Light & Evans, 2013; Morton, 2022; Townsend & Cushion, 2021, 2022), Schubring et al. (2024) highlight the need to better understand influences on coaching in a variety of countries and contexts from this theoretical perspective. These efforts may be instrumental in supporting

coaches to coach responsibly, ethically, and equitably within the prolympic context (Erez & Shoshana, 2023; Jones et al., 2021). Importantly, Bourdieu (1977) provides a sociological framework that prioritizes the social conditions and forces that encourage and guide coaches to behave in certain ways and according to certain principles (Burawoy, 2019). This approach will allow me to conceptualize independent youth hockey in Alberta as a 'field' with certain doxa, habitus formation, and capital, and to better understand how coaches navigate the dominant set of limits and pressures associated with prolympic youth sport (Donnelly, 1996).

4.2 Prolympism, Bourdieu, and the Changing Field of Youth Hockey

According to Bourdieu (1977, 1978, 1984), a field is a relatively autonomous social environment with defined boundaries, values, and rules. Townsend and Cushion (2022) describe sport as a "germane and visible empirical field for the sociological investigation of the social practices and discourses that work to reproduce foundational, but arbitrary, ideas" (p. 893). Independent youth hockey in Alberta, for example, tends to align with prolympic values and the prioritization of elite sport performance, not unlike other corporatized sport environments, including professional hockey (e.g., Morton, 2022). Importantly, while Bourdieu (1978) identifies characteristics of the general sporting field, he also explains how more specific fields can be identified based on their distinct histories and social practices, which are always struggled over and contested. He elaborates:

> the *social definition of sport* is an object of struggles, that the field of sporting practices is the site of struggles in which what is at stake, *inter alia*, is the monopolistic capacity to impose the legitimate definition of sporting practice and of the legitimate function of sporting activity – amateurism vs. professionalism, participant sport vs. spectator sport, distinctive (elite) sport vs. popular (mass sport) (p. 826, emphasis in original)

Therefore, independent youth hockey can be examined as its own social field with distinct limits and pressures—a field in which the legitimate definition of sporting practice is dominated by commercial, prolympic, and competitive values that are often internalized and reproduced by coaches (Cushion & Jones, 2006).

According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), doxa refers to the dominant, internalized, governing principle of the field. In independent youth hockey, the current governing principles seem to be a commercialized, professionalized, and competitively oriented focus on development. In practice, though, 'development' is often centered around outcomes that align with the performance ethic, such as winning and producing draftable players to provide a reserve army of labour for different leagues (Ingham et al., 2002). This complicates coaches' navigation of independent youth hockey, simply because they must determine whether they can overcome the contradictions contained in the host of corporate and competitive forces that influence their coaching practices. While coaches adopt doxa to maintain the values and integrity of the field (Cushion & Jones, 2006), the uncritical approval of current practices does not easily allow for critical reflection or for learning beyond what already exists in the environment (Leeder & Cushion, 2022). As coaches are formed and informed by their environment, which they in turn help shape, they are likely to develop personal dispositions that will not disrupt existing practices (Bourdieu, 1998; Webb & Leeder, 2022). For example, a coach may decide to give extra ice time to highly skilled players, or they may choose to hire positional skills coaches to run a weekly session for the team; these decisions are likely to be accepted in a competitive environment because they align with a prolympic, competitive doxa.

Habitus is another crucial and interrelated concept for Bourdieu. As noted above, coaches may embrace a variety of commitments to dominant ways of thinking, including the sport ethic

as they respond to mounting pressures to win and advance in the prolympic field (Cushion & Jones, 2014). These strong, and apparently necessary, commitments to particular ways of thinking relate to how "individuals require a certain set of 'dispositions' to access and position themselves within [a particular] social field" (Schubring et al., 2024, p. 1961). These embodied dispositions, or "propensities towards particular values and behaviours" (Biesta et al., 2011, p. 87) are produced through past and current competitive experiences in the field to inform a certain type of habitus (Erez & Shoshana, 2023). Habitus refers to a "subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 86).

In other words, habitus is the tendency for group members to think and behave similarly (Giulianotti, 2015). The strength of the habitus is such that even though "individual life trajectories are different, those who pass through similar fields tend to develop a similar habitus" (Light & Evans, 2013, p. 408). In the field of independent youth hockey, the habitus impacts coaches' behaviour (Cushion & Jones, 2006) including decision making, encouraging them to behave in certain ways as they navigate the prolympic field. For example, coaches learn to value competitive and intense hyper-masculine behaviours, often through their own experiences as players, which helped form their habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu (2001) explains how masculinity, in particular, is learned, embodied, and celebrated within our patriarchal society such that members gain power, control, and influence by adopting a masculine habitus. Through ongoing development of their habitus, coaches learn to negotiate the current prolympic environment in distinct ways (Webb & Leeder, 2022).

This process depends on exchanges of capital, a form of power that influences interactions through symbolic, social, cultural, and economic dimensions in the prolympic field

(Cushion & Jones, 2014). Coaches occupy a central position in any team hierarchy, and much of their coaching practice involves equipping players with various forms of capital to improve individual and performance—to the benefit of the coaches themselves (Cushion & Jones, 2006). As many coaches are former players themselves, they likely gained various forms of capital through their own experiences and are uniquely positioned to use their accumulated capital to inform how they coach and develop athletes (Decosse & Norcliffe, 2020). For example, coaches in competitive contexts likely provide copious feedback to athletes to correct their behaviour and facilitate the transference of embodied cultural capital (Townsend & Cushion, 2022), which is described as the entrenchment of a competitive disposition in the mind and body over time (DeLuca & Andrews, 2016). Other common forms of capital that are accumulated in sport include: social capital as a network of connections (DeLuca & Andrews, 2016); symbolic capital from "personal prestige and renown" (Cushion & Jones, 2014, p. 280); and physical capital in the form of physical attributes or abilities (Hall et al., 2022).

4.2.1 Prolympic Hockey in Alberta

As prolympism becomes more entrenched in the youth hockey landscape in Alberta, it becomes increasingly expensive, owing largely to equipment costs, additional training commitments, and the employment of additional player support personnel (i.e., agents; Decosse & Norcliffe, 2020). While ice and equipment fees are necessary for participation in ice hockey, most of the recent escalation in cost relates to athlete development and the production of elite performance (Coakley, 2010; Ingham et al., 2002). This leads to further increases in paid and specialty coaching, travel for competition, longer seasons, and earlier sport participation contribute to rapid increases in the costs associated with sport (Decosse & Norcliffe, 2020) in increasingly market-driven exchanges (Brown, 2015). Players start earlier, practice more, and

spend more, becoming participants in the further commodification and economization of youth sport (De Knop et al., 1996). As prolympism is "elitist, achievement oriented and purportedly meritocratic" (Ingham et al., 2002, p. 309), the promise of 'development' encourages athletes and coaches alike to submit to the demands of the field.

While there is evidence of positive developmental outcomes for youth in countries like Sweden (Martel, 2015) and Norway (Ødyna & Bjørndal, 2022) where more balanced strategies are implemented (i.e., late specialization and multi-sport participation), the North American propensity is for participants to embrace commercially oriented approaches (Ingham et al., 2002; Taylor et al., 2017). Commercialization is but one way that prolympism transforms youth sport into an exclusionary environment (Donnelly, 1996). Ingham et al. (2002) explain that one of the primary goals of the prolympic system is to act as a feeder system to professional leagues as youth learn "what they need to do to move up to the next level" (p. 312). In a Bourdieusian sense, athletes are trying to accrue as much capital as they continue climbing the athletic ranks to ply their labour for others (DeLuca & Andrews, 2016; Hall et al., 2022). With progressively fewer opportunities at higher levels of competition, most youth are destined to fail on their quest to elite competition. Unfortunately, the reality that an athlete is expendable within the prolympic system is only revealed once their labour has created value within the system, leaving them vulnerable to relations of "extraction and expropriation" (Ingham et al., 2002, p. 309).

Unfortunately, the precarity and exploitation that face youth athletes in the prolympic system also confronts coaches, who "have a vested interested in expanding existing programs and in designing new programming in ways that reinforce club members' perceptions of the value of the paid professional's work," especially as they become hopeful that their "part-time position just might become a full-time job" (Gruneau, 2016, p. 234). These factors further

intensify the professionalization of coaching in youth sport (Schubring et al., 2024). Professionalization brings with it many advantages, often allowing organizations to operate more efficiently and productively toward a dedicated goal (Hill et al., 2021). However, professionalization can further embed a focus on outcome as coaches strive to win games to demonstrate their program's quality and their own credentials (Bjørndal & Ronglan, 2018; Hill et al., 2021).

In a recent autoethnography, Preston et al. (2021) observed the modern relevance of prolympism, as pressures to win pushed coaches to limit playing time for underperforming players. For coaches in the prolympic system, these types of actions are necessary to show they can win, while insuring "a continuous supply of elite level athletes" (Ingham et al., 2002, p. 309). As more youth sport programs become professionalized, there is an emerging narrative that professionalized programs are better and more worthwhile than older, volunteer-run programs (Hill et al., 2021; Schubring et al., 2024). This perception pervades the youth sport landscape, forcing youth and parents to increase their commitments in professionalized environments; rising dropout in youth sport suggests that professionalization may, in fact, be harming the overall youth sport experience for those who can even access the field in the first place (Ingham et al., 2002). Crucially, the elevation of competitive priorities and the attainment of success could continue to marginalize goals of inclusion and equity in Alberta youth hockey (Abdou, 2021; Ingham et al., 2002), a transition that is unlikely to reverse course (Gruneau, 2016).

As more is expected from coaches, additional expectations are placed on athletes (and parents), forcing them to embrace a more intense commitment to sport (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). While not problematic in itself, increases in the frequency and intensity sport commitments may decrease positive experiences in sport (Coakley, 2007). An extreme sport

commitment has been conceptualized as the sport ethic, which outlines that "true" athletes must strive for distinction, accept risks, and sacrifice to overcome barriers (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Adoption of the sport ethic may cause athletes to believe that only an extreme commitment will allow them to be successful (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). For coaches, the question is how they can support player development within an increasingly prolympic and corporatized sport system without demanding unreasonable commitments from youth athletes through additional training and higher-level training (Gruneau, 2016; Hughes & Coakley, 1991). While coaches grapple with this question, it increasingly appears that corporatized player development has formed the "pre-existent conditions that constituted the field – that is, a doxic order" (Townsend & Cushion, 2021, p. 259).

As coaches navigate an increasingly professionalized, commercialized, and demanding context (Camiré, 2015), they must make a host of decisions (Light et al., 2014) around player development that center around how to manage and exchange capital as part of their coaching roles (Morton, 2022). Especially as they work toward the allure of competitive success in the prolympic system (Pope et al., 2018), coaches must grapple with the benefits and risks of greater training intensities or practices like early specialization (Mosher et al., 2020). In other words, coaches must leverage the social and cultural capital that they gained through their own playing and coaching experiences to support a particular model of player development in the prolympic field (Cushion & Jones, 2014).

The field of independent youth hockey in Alberta has gained popularity through its apparent commitment to development. However, questions remain about the means of pursuing development, which may increasingly reveal a doxic order (Townsend & Cushion, 2021) that is prolympic (Donnelly, 1996; Ingham et al., 2002), commercialized (Decosse & Norcliffe, 2020),

professionalized (Dowling et al., 2014), and intense (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Considering these changes to youth hockey in Alberta, the purpose of this study is to better understand coaches' navigation of player development in the prolympic field of independent youth hockey in Alberta. This objective will be accomplished by answering the following research question: How do youth hockey coaches support and pursue player development as they navigate the field of independent youth hockey?

4.3 Methods

4.3.1 Participants

I used purposeful criterion-based sampling (Patton, 2002) to recruit six coaches from independent youth hockey leagues because their recent exponential growth has drastically transformed youth hockey in Alberta. Coaches were actively coaching male youth hockey players in Alberta aged 11-15; notably, only two of the six participants were paid for their coaching duties, a point I return to later. Although the sample had goals of being equitable (Abdou, 2021), all participants were men; the relative homogeneity of independent youth hockey coaches in terms of gender, class, and experience resulted in limited diversity, and speaks to enduring equity issues in youth hockey.

Several steps were taken to ensure minimal risks to participants through the duration of the research.[22] The study was explained in its entirety to all potential participants and consent was gathered before interviews were conducted (Patton, 2002). Participants were aware they could decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any point during the research. Finally, every effort has been made to ensure participants remain anonymous.

[22] This research has been approved by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board under Pro00134273.

4.3.2 Data Collection

Each participant was observed for two practices and one game during their respective seasons, which helped to familiarize me with team activities and contributed to the rapport and trust I was able to build with participants. These participant observations, along with comprehensive field notes taken during and after each observation, supported the development of specific probes related to practice activities within the subsequent interviews (Patton, 2002). For example, observational field notes included details about drill selection, communication style, practice timing, player and coach body language, as well as parental attendance, all information that helped me understand the unique features of the environment before interviews were conducted (Patton, 2002). Semi-structured, individual interviews (Markula & Silk, 2011) were used to allow coaches to explain decisions around player development within the youth hockey context. Five participants completed an in-person interview, while one coach was interviewed over Zoom. Interviews ranged from 59 to 91 minutes (average = 72 minutes).

Semi-structured interviews were used to support the generation of rich data regarding individuals' experiences, as well as deeper consideration of "people's personal perspectives and experiences" (Patton, 2002, p. 40). Semi-structured interviews carry the additional benefit of allowing the researcher to probe or encourage participants to elaborate on information provided (Mayan, 2009). The qualitative and subjective nature of interviews fit with a critical perspective and supports the collection of a breadth of perspectives to appreciate a broader understanding of how coaching youth hockey in understood (Giulianotti, 2015). The notes taken during the process of data collection helped me reflect on the generation of data and encouraged reflexivity as the research progressed (Patton, 2002). Reflexivity, to Bourdieu, constituted an interrogation

of how, and by whom, knowledge was produced (Schirato & Webb, 2002). This understanding positions reflexivity as an important practice for this critical research.

4.3.3 Interview Guide

A comprehensive interview guide was created and piloted with two coaches before any interviews were conducted, building on areas that involve coaching decisions (Light et al., 2014) in the new field of independent youth hockey (Bourdieu, 1977), including topics related to development (Edwards, 2016), commercialization (Taylor & Garratt, 2010), professionalization (Dowling et al., 2014), and the sport ethic (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). The interviews allowed me to understand what drew coaches to the independent youth hockey field, how coaches prepared to coach in independent youth hockey, and what principles they used to balance developmental and competitive priorities. Data included details about coaches' experiences, their potential espousal of the sport ethic, in particular, and their contributions toward the new field of independent youth hockey. A complete draft of the interview guide for coaches is attached (Appendix B).

4.3.4 Data Analysis

After interviews were transcribed verbatim, interview analysis was conducted according to a 7-step interview analysis process (Markula et al., 2023). Step 1 of this process involves copying and pasting interview responses from all interviewees into a consolidated section for each question, making it easy to review questions individually. In practice, I found that some responses overlapped with each other, so I identified eight relatively distinct categories and organized the data according to those categories. In Step 2, I identified "common themes in their interview answers for each question" (Markula et al., 2023, p. 7). Themes in this step were considered meaningful when they were frequently repeated, when they appeared problematic or

contradictory, and when concepts seemed to be missing from the conversation (Boyatzis, 1998). A total of 87 initial themes were identified in Step 2.

Step 3 involved comparing and condensing the list of themes from each section with the broader themes (Markula et al., 2023) of development, commercialization, and professionalization; at the end of this step, 10 working themes were identified. In Step 4, I developed three main themes, along with two subthemes, by cross-referencing themes in each category with themes generated in all other categories. Step 5 initiated the writing process, where I integrated my analysis of the themes with participant quotations. In Step 6, I connected my themes and located my research within the bodies of coaching research and youth sport. Finally, in Step 7, I drew deeper connections with theoretical sociocultural literature, with particular emphasis on the sport ethic and Bourdieusian philosophy, to extend my research and apply my critical perspective. My main aims through this analysis were to understand coaches' experiences related to development and to understand how they navigate Alberta youth hockey.

4.3.5 Quality Standards

Several measures were employed to ensure the quality of this research. First, pilot interviews were conducted with two coaches; both were actively coaching in independent youth hockey in Alberta, which ensured the clarity and suitability of the questions for participants (Mayan, 2009). Second, field notes were taken periodically—during observations and after each interview—to act as an audit trail (Patton, 2002) and a method of reflexivity (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Participants were also given a two-week opportunity to review their interview transcripts to ensure the data accurately represented their beliefs and experiences; one participant modified their interview transcript to add deeper description to one of their responses. Finally, my doctoral supervisory committee acted as critical friends (Smith & McGannon, 2018)

throughout the research, offering critical feedback and encouraging reflexivity from the early planning stages all the way through the final stages of writing.

4.4 Findings and Discussion

Three primary themes were identified through the data analysis process, which helped to make sense of the decisions that coaches have made as they navigated the independent youth hockey field. This section will further develop the primary themes, which are 1) 'the developmental doxa?', 2) 'tailoring to a tier one mindset', and 3) 'the accumulation and exchange of capital,' along with two subthemes. Each theme is presented along with Bourdieusian principles that help critically analyze how coaches navigate independent youth hockey by a) adopting a doxa within a field that aligned with prolympic developmental priorities, b) obtaining capital by recruiting individuals whose mindset matched a competitive habitus, and c) using different forms of capital to influence interactions with their teams.

4.4.1 The Developmental Doxa?

Coaches considered a variety of environmental- and organizational-specific details before transitioning to independent youth hockey, a field that would allow, if not demand, them to coach with a more explicit focus on development in market terms. Participants unanimously highlighted aspects of independent youth hockey that they believed better supported the development of players in the prolympic system, many made possible through the political and economic pressures described in the literature review. For example, the HSL mandates teams to provide approximately twice as much practice time as traditional minor hockey environments, offering more ice-time for coaches like Tyler to patiently and consistently focus on "the how's and why's of everything. Development is the understanding of why we are doing this." However, the expense of additional ice time for independent teams brings even more pressure for coaches:

they need to showcase (and justify) expensive specialty skills sessions, in particular, as a way of cultivating physical and cultural capital as common sense (Decosse & Norcliffe, 2020).

Contrary to my expectations about high-paid coaches, most coaches (4 of the 6) were part-time volunteers who did not receive any payment from their teams: only one coach was compensated in a full-time capacity; another received a monthly stipend for his part-time role. Instead, most coaches juggled their volunteer coaching positions with other forms of employment outside of coaching, in many ways retaining their subordinate and precarious status in the field. Coaches had different reasons for retaining their volunteer status; some acknowledged a lack of opportunity for upward mobility in the prolympic sport system, and the scarcity of secure coaching positions (Ingham et al., 2002). Others, however, were content with making unpaid, volunteer commitments, to keep a foot in the door in the prolympic hockey field.

Still, all coaches made lengthy commitments to their teams, remaining with the same group of players for an average of three years. This allowed them to advocate for a more process-focused atmosphere, which could demonstrate to both parents and to league executives that they were not only successful, but responsive and responsible coaches. Dylan, for example, encouraged parents—his customers—to "measure the success of the season on where your kid started, where he was at Christmas, and where he was at the end of the year." He also reminded parents about his focus on middle-class values of committed practice (i.e., high quantities of intense practice and skill development), which, for him, outweighed winning and losing as a metric, a complicated point to which I return later. Indeed, each and every coach in the study chose to communicate their middle-class developmental focus so overtly that it seemed to have become "an invisible reality that governs practice, which Bourdieu terms doxa" (Hall et al., 2022, p. 389).

Coaches used the knowledge and skills they gained from their long histories in men's hockey, which provided them with cultural capital to advance their developmental agendas and their own careers, often in unique ways. For example, two coaches, Tyler and Jesse, drew on their experiences as former players about what constituted proper development in the prolympic field. Many of their beliefs had been cultivated through their interactions with legendary University of Alberta coach, Clare Drake, who greatly advanced coach development and advocated for coaches to focus on technical skill development (e.g., skating, shooting, blocking shots, winning faceoffs, etc.) along with the personal and individual development of players, demonstrating "concern for them as people" (Draper, 2013, p. 44). Coach Drake was a strong proponent for coaches and players alike to be generous in passing on the knowledge, values, and culture they learned through hockey (Draper, 2013), in many ways facilitating the transmission of (informal) cultural capital (Cushion & Jones, 2014).

In embracing these values, coaches also frequently collaborated with their peers in the broader independent environment as they navigated the prolympic field together; this was a marked difference from coaches' experiences in minor hockey, where most coaches operate independently, and competitively. Tyler explained how, in minor hockey, "if I really want to work with you, but, we're two very good coaches, a lot of times, they'll say, hey we have two teams – Dallas, you get one; Tyler, you get one." The lack of opportunity to form meaningful and supportive relationships was a significant downside for coaches in their earlier minor hockey experiences. Interestingly, Jake described a more collegial and mutually supportive atmosphere in independent hockey, where coaches were able to gain social and cultural capital through their relationships with "wicked, wicked coaches.[23] We're always emailing and sharing ideas and

[23] In this context, the word "wicked" was used informally to describe what the participant believed to be an "excellent" group of coaches.

resources." These relationships were based on solidarity and friendship between groups of people who share similar backgrounds and levels of capital, at the same time developing additional forms of capital through social connections and the exchange of knowledge.

But what types of ideas and resources about coaching are exchanged in the field of independent youth hockey? Many coach decisions continue to support player development through professionalized processes and through exclusively rationalistic and competitive principles. For example, Tyler explained his progressive delivery of technical skills, which focuses on a "performance stage, then layering over execution. After execution, what's my battle?" But others also pushed back against some of the dominant ideas in coaching in their pursuit of player development, a reminder that the doxa is constantly negotiated and can be challenged, but only if coaches are willing to question and challenge the status quo (Cushion & Jones, 2014). For example, Jake focused on his own growth as a key element of his professional coaching role, encouraging him to be "more adaptable, flexible… so you're not trying to ram the same type of development down everybody's throat." Likewise, in games, Dylan stressed the need to provide meaningful opportunities to his players in an environment that allowed them to make mistakes without fearing the loss of ice time: "I thought this year that I was going to use ice time as a poker chip. And that changed this year. How are kids supposed to learn if they can't make mistakes?" Dylan began letting players learn through their own experiences rather than by punishing their mistakes after a conversation he had with one of his assistant coaches, who encouraged him to embrace a more patient approach with young people. While Dylan may not have used ice time as a poker chip, the pressure to use ice time as a valuable and coveted form of capital was evident in the experiences and doxa of all independent youth hockey coaches.

As noted earlier, many of the coaches in the study explicitly noted that they have tried to deprioritize winning and competitive success in their current roles as evidence of player development. Max, for example, said "that wins and losses to me are irrelevant. I think they are a way of keeping score in how you're developing your players and your team." Even though his team had been successful, Tyler also described how winning was not a governing priority for his team: "over the last five years, I think we're probably over an 80%-win ratio. Do we talk about wins? We actually don't." However, Cushion and Jones (2014) found that, even when it may seem 'hidden' or secondary, winning tends to be a dominant coaching priority; for Tyler, the pressure to win might become more pronounced if he had not been so competitively successful. Jake also noted that he tried to cultivate a different team atmosphere: "it's not win at all costs. And I'm not going to necessarily pull a guy back to put a guy out. Sometimes you gotta let a guy who has never played in the last minute learn how to do it."

Still, even though some coaches spoke about their lack of concern for winning in interviews, I noticed in my observations that coaches' delivery was both intense and intentional in emphasizing the development of competitive behaviours, guided by the technocratic imperatives of the performance principle, and to the sport ethic in general in the prolympic field (Ingham et al., 2002). Jesse, for example, explained how "everything had a reason and a purpose, with the whole idea that we were going to get better all the time." I also noted in my observational field notes high levels of intensity (Hughes & Coakley, 1991) in how coaches responded to perceived low effort (Jake) or competitiveness (Scott). For example, coaches would

often interrupt practice to instruct players to work harder,[24] encouraging them to push the limits of their current abilities (Hughes & Coakley, 1991).

Indeed, throughout the interviews, I encouraged coaches to describe specific elements of their coaching practice that better supported players as they both attempted to ascend the prolympic hierarchy. The ubiquitous buzzword of "development" was so often discussed that it appeared to represent the coaches' doxa, a group of "common sense or tacitly accepted ideals" (Cushion & Jones, 2014, p. 294). Just as Hall et al. (2022) found in their study of youth football academies that there were "few specific suggestions for how coaches 'should' behave, with coaches drawing on 'buzz words' that have become popularised in coaching," I found the same regarding 'development' in independent youth hockey. For instance, I noted in my field notes that there was little variety in terms of practice content: very similar, if not identical, drills and activities dominated practice sessions, even if certain coaches were less focussed on wins and losses. Development, in this respect, means the values of a dominant, performance-based prolympic monoculture. In the prolympic system, after all, the goal of development remains subservient to that of performance (Ingham et al., 2002). Ingham et al. (2002) propose an alternative vision of development in sport where democratic, participatory, and inclusive goals are elevated, thereby limiting exclusion and creating "sport for all" (p. 324).

In my research, there were many contradictions in the pure pursuit of prolympic development, hinting at the underlying and unquestioned value of competitiveness and, by extension, winning found in other Bourdieusian coaching research (e.g., Cushion & Jones, 2014).

[24] Coaches would use the additional stoppages to reinforce practice and game habits they wanted players to adopt. In some cases, this feedback was provided to individual players while at other times, the message was directed at the entire team. In these latter cases, coaches' volume would increase, and they would display high energy and enthusiasm. While not yelling at players disparagingly, coaches brought energy and enthusiasm to their coaching to encourage players to bring the same values to their play.

This was especially evident in my game observations, where coaches committed to using special-team units (i.e., using higher-skill players during odd-man situations), and to shortening the bench (using elite players more than less-skilled ones) during critical moments of game play. These decisions demonstrated that the desire to win dominated and encouraged coaches to make similar decisions under similar conditions (Cushion & Jones, 2014). Jesse, for example, rationalized keeping some players away from overly competitive situations like the final minutes of a game. He said, "why put them in a position to fail when we want them in a position to succeed? So, what we'll try to do is protect them from getting out there and getting victimized." However, these protective actions may limit athletes' opportunities to learn life lessons through failure and adversity—a different kind of development (Ronkainen et al., 2022). Coaches' decisions around playing time are a major indicator of the extent to which a developmental agenda is still largely equated to the performance-principle and winning, and aligned with their professional reputations (Cushion & Jones, 2014; Hall et al., 2022). Scott explained his decision to shorten the bench in the semi-final of their year-end tournament:

> The last eight minutes we had three kids that probably hadn't seen the ice. I don't like to do it, but I mean you still gotta coach. That's an important game you gotta win. You're trying to win. But even at that, I held on as long as possible right to the last eight minutes."

Under the pressure of the prolympic system, "acquiring a sense of autonomy is difficult under the constant threats of evaluation and expendability" (Ingham, 2002, p. 315) and Scott felt that had little choice but to shorten the bench, or else risk being questioned by parents and administrators (and perhaps even his players), and potentially replaced.

As noted earlier, coaches rely on collaboration as their main source of learning, but they also increasingly access dominant online resources from "the coaches' site, LinkedIn, X, or

Instagram" (Max). This reliance on historical influences and technocratic knowledge found on social media do little more than reproduce the doxa of outcome-focused values and prolympic practices (Hall et al., 2022). Leeder and Cushion (2020) explain how the reproduction of coaching cultures tends to uncritically accept and legitimize dominant perspectives—especially in professionalized settings—thereby entrenching existing values and perpetuating issues of inequity and exclusion (Szto, 2021). Ingham et al. (2002) highlight the ways in which coaches abandon their hopes of generativity for the belief that "the past is tried and true and should not be abandoned" (p. 321), entrapping themselves in a cycle of stagnation. A critical education could help coaches expand their circle of learning to avoid simply reproducing their own or others' experiences in the sport (i.e., committing to custodialism; Ingham et al., 2022), a point that I return to in the conclusion (Cushion & Jones, 2014; Denison et al., 2017; Webb & Leeder, 2022). Indeed, thinking critically may require coaches to embrace the dynamic aspects of the coaching environment to the point of becoming "critical of past mentors, cherished memories or indeed his or her own sense of self and identity as a coach" (Denison, 2010, p. 466). This may allow coaches to resist or subvert some of the dominant pressures to win (Cushion & Jones, 2014).

However, it is not only the local competitive pressures that coaches must navigate but also the broader economically-driven priorities that push coaches to retain customers in this hyper-competitive prolympic field (Brown, 2015). For example, coaches often encounter significant pressure from middle-class parents who spend increasing amounts of money on their children's sport participation; if parents expect to see competitive success, coaches may be forced to play to win, or risk losing a paying customer and damaging their professional reputations. Certainly, many coaches had a complicated relationship with development and

winning, pursuing both, but often elevating competitive goals above broader developmental ones. The promotion of competitiveness (Hughes & Coakley, 1991) invites questions about the role of adult-driven sport in the lives of youth and the appropriateness of potentially over-competitive youth sport fields (Camiré, 2015; Schubring et al., 2024). It also reveals how development may act as a façade that conceals the true doxa consisting of other competitive priorities and the values of the broader prolympic field (Cushion & Jones, 2014). Coaches' decisions about the type of individual they recruit to their independent teams, and the habitus they want to support, further complicates the true priority in independent youth hockey (Bourdieu, 1977).

4.4.2 Tailoring to a Tier One Mindset

As coaches have transitioned to independent youth hockey over the past seven years, they increasingly reinforce the "production and characterization of the elite habitus" (Erez & Shoshana, 2023, p. 1192), particularly in their recruitment and coaching of players with a "competitive edge." Max explained how "kids that are now in the tier one of minor hockey, they're not tier one mindset." Players in the HSL, on the other hand, "need to be hungry, they need to be learning more, they want more, and they're gonna look for that" (Tyler). Scott, a PHL coach, indicated that in independent hockey, "you've got a little bit more of an expectation to show up and work hard. And they're not putting out money just to skate around." Realistically, coaches were looking to recruit athletes who displayed a willingness to strive for distinction through commitment, risk, and sacrifice (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Coaches, therefore, appeared to move to independent hockey so their decisions could be made according to an overt competitive, middle-class habitus, which would allow for more "control, obedience, work ethic and winning" (Cushion & Jones, 2014, p. 284).

But coaches were also recruited themselves by parents who sought to purchase hockey experiences for their children in ways that matched their own competitive outlook. Dylan explained that a group of parents in his community reached out to him and asked him to coach:

> If I'm gonna coach, you know, we're there to have fun, don't get me wrong. But if you want to compete against those guys, we need to have development practices. We need to have some guys coming in, and we're gonna do other things, right? They're like, yeah, let's do it. Let's do it.

The recruitment of only suitably competitive individuals as coaches and players in independent youth hockey – those willing to accept the "responsibility for embodying an elite lifestyle" (Townsend & Cushion, 2022, p. 902) – all but guarantees the homogenization of individuals in youth hockey by including only those who are positioned to adopt the competitive habitus to accumulate capital within the prolympic field.

While independent youth hockey removes organizational barriers through the opening of a previously closed system (Edwards, 2016), the entrenched and intensely competitive doxa creates a different barrier to entry (Bourdieu, 1977; Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Independent hockey becomes a field governed by money and by the complete commitment of participants/customers, a cultural field where a habitus of highly competitive behaviours dominates (DeLuca & Andrews, 2016). Coaches expressed this indirectly by choosing to encourage less motivated or competitive coaches to "look elsewhere" for opportunities. Jake said, "maybe the coach doesn't want to be on the ice every day, so that [minor hockey] AAA 2 or 3 times a week fits his lifestyle better." Similarly, Max expressed his belief that independent youth hockey was designed for competitive players, and "if you're not that guy or girl, a different level is ready for you." If participants did not embrace the sacrificial and risky

behaviors associated with the overconformity of the sport ethic (Hughes & Coakley, 1991), they were encouraged to "go back to" minor hockey.

Still, with no residency-restrictive boundaries in independent youth hockey, coaches were supportive of the agency offered to parents of talented young prospects to choose the program that would work best for them as a matter of consumer choice. Tyler used a monopoly metaphor, underlining that in minor hockey, "you only had one grocery store in town. Now we have four grocery stores that we can go to. And I can choose which one has the cost that I might like or the quality." Jesse explained that "there might be a lot of kids in the family, and they'll be going in a lot of different directions simultaneously. So, it allows them to get, or find, the right fit for them." With parents and players looking to find the right fit, coaches decided to run their teams by appealing to the tastes and preferences of potential middle-class participants, most of whom had previous experiences in hockey themselves (Giulianotti, 2015). However, by structuring programs to align with the narrow experience of competitive-minded individuals, independent youth hockey runs the risk of excluding individuals without deep immersion in a competitive hockey habitus, and who may not come from families with money. For example, the coaches themselves tried to recruit parents/customers whose values they knew would match a committed and competitive, middle-class habitus; Dylan shared that "the parent group understands the buy in, because I think we're all like-minded. Right? I think we all want the same thing for our kids, to be good people and hard working." Max also enjoyed the ability to "manage the families I brought into the group. So that I just had to focus on hockey and not worry about parents and their own personal agendas." Therefore, parents' awareness of, and compliance to, the demands of the independent youth hockey field became a contingent factor for their participation, and a

defining element of their middle-class habitus (Bourdieu, 1977; Cushion & Jones, 2014; Hall et al., 2022).

While coaches aspire to work with like-minded parents, in the expansive youth hockey market, middle-class parents can "vote with their feet. They don't like how a coach is coaching, they're also available to leave. They can choose to go." (Max). The new ability for participants to switch organizations creates competition between organizations in the prolympic field, which does not exist in minor hockey due to recruitment boundaries (Edwards, 2016; Hoven, 2024). This novel source of pressure between independent organizations amplifies the commercial and professional elements in youth sport for coaches (Decosse & Norcliffe, 2020). Contrary to the general support for intense commitments from coaches, some coaches felt that organizational pressures could contribute to an overinvestment from parents. Dylan, for example, encouraged parents to engage in self-reflection and ask themselves:

> Are you there because you want your kid to go far? Are you there because that's what he wants? Once parents start questioning that a little harder, I think that's for the better. It'll be better for the kids. How many kids you know that quit hockey because mom and dad push them too hard?'

Dylan's commentary represents an interesting contradiction in the fulsome push for a competitive habitus, offering a small reprieve from the competitive agenda. But this reprieve is often short-lived when considering the ways that coaches must fight for capital in the competitive prolympic field.

4.4.3 The Exchange and Accumulation of Capital

Along with coaches' decisions about development and their recruitment of sufficiently competitive families, coaches also faced enormous pressure to consistently manage their own

forms of symbolic, social, and cultural capital associated with their new roles in the prolympic field along entrepreneurial lines. This included the symbolic capital from the perceived elite status of independent youth hockey, the cultural capital produced from their own experiences in hockey, and the social capital accumulated from the connections they made in hockey (Cushion & Jones, 2014). In many ways, coaches also justified parents' investments of economic capital (Coakley, 2007) by reminding them of their own attainment of other forms of capital.

Symbolically, for example, coaches who moved to independent hockey promoted privilege and prestige from their newfound association, which they in turn use to recruit parents and athletes (Cushion & Jones, 2014). Dylan mentioned that independent hockey was able to dissociate itself from the burdensome and stagnant reputation of minor hockey and its expansive bureaucracy, where there are "doing it their way, not willing to change—and it's affecting kids—that's the bottom line. They want to be stuck in their ways and rule with an iron fist." They emphasized to parents that they could improve their status in the prolympic minor hockey field by joining independent leagues, a message they conveyed through "a particular social 'game'" (Hall et al., 2022, p. 379) centered around capital accumulation.

Coaches accomplished this by ensuring that parents and players were aware of the value—the different forms of capital—they gained through their membership and fees. In the independent hockey environment, the social game included open lines of communication with parents about the "value" of the hockey product they were consuming; "we go out to the parent group and say, where are we at? What is everybody feeling?" (Tyler). Jake felt that independent coaches' willingness to be flexible and to treat parents with respect was beginning to "speak for itself a lot more… if we're running a [poor] product, people aren't gonna pay to spend the money to come to us, and they're gonna go where they have their options." In this competitive field,

coaches are now, more than ever, also salespeople (Brown, 2015), underlining their own subordinate status and the types of market pressures they need to continually navigate.

In their conversations with parents (i.e., customers), coaches also highlighted the embodied cultural capital (DeLuca & Andrews, 2016) that players gain through prolonged participation in independent youth hockey. For example, as part of their prolympic sales pitch, coaches underlined how players are explicitly taught to think (Jake) and act (Tyler) like "professionals" in independent hockey not only in terms of how to play, but also how to behave according to the sport's dominant values. As the embodiment of cultural capital happens over a long period of time (Cushion & Jones, 2014), coaches unsurprisingly promoted players' commitment to independent youth hockey as early as possible to allow them to develop the skills necessary to succeed in a prolympic system (Ingham et al., 2002). Dylan explained, "I wish I would have had them two years ago, because then we could have been just a little bit more ahead." In other words, part of the sales pitch to families is that young players need to enter the prolympic system as early as possible so that young players can begin accumulating as much capital at ever earlier ages (DeLuca & Andrews, 2016). As Tyler notes, he needs to cultivate loyalty with paying customers to retain them:

> Some people might call it exclusive. With all the people over the last five years that we've had on the team, people have always been invited back. We've never cut anybody. It's my job as a coach to develop players. It's not my job to say it's time to change this player for this player during those formative development years.

Tyler's enduring commitment offers players more time to learn about the traditions and expectations of the competitive environment so that they may learn to act appropriately, but only if their families can pay for it (Bourdieu, 1977). In addition to Tyler's genuine attempts to

develop athletes, however, he is also under constant pressure in the prolympic system to produce elite performance and retain customers (Donnelly, 1996; Ingham et al., 2002).

Max believed the independent model allowed coaches to "keep stacking on – there's continuity. And I think that continuity is huge." Jake and Tyler both used a chapter book metaphor to explain how coaches could build on content rather than having to review or re-teach concepts from previous years, a practice that allows players to accumulate capital steadily. Tyler shared that for "five years, I've been able to write new chapters onto this book. Now I've got a book with five chapters that we've been adding all the way through." Coaches accepted that the capital accrued by players from long-term experiences in high-quality independent programs represented the privilege stemming from an exclusive class status (DeLuca & Andrews, 2016); "you know, the model seems to work – unfortunately, it becomes exclusive to only a few people" (Jesse).

Prolonged engagement supported the development of social capital for players, offering players access to a network of connections over the years (Giulianotti, 2015). This becomes increasingly important as players approach draft ages, a reminder that the main goal of the prolympic system is to produce athletic labour (Donnelly, 1996). In addition to highly committed and connected head coaches, independent teams also use professional skill providers who facilitate off-ice, specialty, and positional training for players in this broader athletic mode of production. Jake, who coached in the JPHL, explained how players gained access to the network (DeLuca & Andrews, 2016) of services through a fully committed "coaching staff in place at every level" and "professional coaches for everything that's not hockey related." Coaches will even prepare players to be watched and evaluated by scouts for their hopeful progression to higher leagues. Jesse, whose many years of experience has made him familiar with the scouting

process, teaches players to be "mindful of how they behave as much as how they play. Because the scouts are going to be asking those questions." However, some coaches were also skeptical of some of the most extreme forms of networking, such as the paid agencies that are beginning to recruit players at young ages. Max expressed his disdain at the exploitation that takes place in the prolympic field, and at the "agents at our games. It's like, what are you doing? Why are you watching this 12-year-old?" There's a simple answer to Max's question: money.

4.4.3.1 Big Bang for the Buck.[25] Coaches also highlighted the market efficiency of independent youth hockey programs: in the broader competitive field of minor hockey, they believed parents could be confident they were getting good "value" for their money. For example, Scott talked to parents on his team who "told me they've worked out the cost. And it's pretty much comparable to what they paid in minor hockey." The price for programming in the HSL was around $4,000 (Dylan), with the JPHL around $15,000 (Tyler). Although the JPHL pays coaches and provides 10-month daily programming, they also find savings by purchasing flights, hotels, and meals in bulk, prompting Jake to call it "the Costco Hockey League. We're coming in, we're buying bulk hotels and meals." This is possible because every team is owned and operated by the JPHL, illustrating the power of private capital (Silk & Andrews, 2012). Coaches also pointed parents towards prices in the Canadian Sport School Hockey League, most "north of $25,000 a year to play" (Tyler), as evidence of the relative affordability of independent programs. These prices further justify and further normalize existing conditions in the field, and the requirement that high levels of economic capital are necessary to enter any competitive level of youth hockey (Giulianotti, 2015).

[25] 'Big bang for the buck' is a slang phrase to highlight something with good value.

The costs also – even though some coaches believed that parents and players received a "big bang for the buck" (Jesse) – drastically changed the expectations and relationships in independent youth hockey, especially between coaches and middle-class parents. For many parents, their engagement in independent hockey is an economic relation as paying customers. Coaches highlighted that "when you're putting in a little more money, and the parents are making the drive to come to practices and games, they expect a little more" (Scott). One coach, Max, was so impacted by these pressures that he refused to accept payment from the team, believing that any compensation would contribute to the excessive parental demands that are now common in the field; he said, "I didn't want to get paid as a coach – I think expectations change a little bit even though it might only be five grand, right? Like, [expletive] I'm paying you." Similarly, Jake felt that this led to "pressure from the parents, probably more than anything, than the program, like, if they're spending x amount of dollars, are they getting the value?" Once money exchanges hands, relationships change. And, as parents pay more money to facilitate participation, a market-oriented rationality grips and influences relationships as parents quickly learn to expect more return on their financial investments, from both coaches and from their children (Duncan, 2018).

4.5 Conclusion

In this study, I explored how coaches navigate player development within the prolympic and highly corporatized independent youth hockey field in Alberta. While some coaches consider and carry out small acts of resistance, the environment essentially demands commitment to an intense and developmental (read prolympic and competitive) doxa (Bourdieu, 1977) and requires coaches to recruit middle-class families and children whose beliefs and values matched a competitive habitus. They approached coach-parent and coach-athlete

interactions through appeals to different forms of capital, and along the lines of market relations. While independent youth hockey coaches may offer more support for youth athletes (Bourdieu, 1977; Giulianotti, 2015), growing demands contribute to the exclusivity of youth hockey and the "organized production of elite identity" (Erez & Shoshana, 2023, p. 1183), a reality that coaches in the study acknowledged. Unfortunately, as Ingham et al. (2002) proposed, the likelihood of disrupting the exclusion, extraction, exploitation, and expendability of the prolympic system is trivial without radical changes to youth sport. Unfortunately, coaches' ability to disrupt the prolympic system while participating in it is extremely limited, owing to their own precarity (Donnelly, 1996) and to the unregulated nature of independent organizations (Lefebvre et al., 2022). To be true resources of hope, coaches must look for ways to truly distance themselves from the prolympic structure, even if it leads to "some desportification of our physical cultural practices" (Ingham et al., 2002, p. 325).

The implications of this study are directed toward independent youth hockey coaches. First, I encourage coaches to uphold their commitment to development and loyalty to players, as did many of the coaches in this study, for these values are among the most positive outcomes stemming from the transition to independent youth hockey. Second, I caution current and future youth hockey coaches to resist growing commercial pressures, understanding that parents' expectations will increase along with their level of investment. Finally, I encourage coaches to demonstrate their commitment to development and to consider how they can avoid reproducing the same athletes and outcomes as previous generations (De Luca & Andrews, 2016). Future research could examine specific activities that facilitate a developmental focus without succumbing to competitive pressures.

There are two primary limitations of this research project. First, the participants were recruited from six different teams within four divisions of the PHL, HSL, and JPHL. The study may have benefited from a closer look at a more specific sample (i.e., a single team or organization) within the independent youth hockey context. Second, a longer observation stage or a second interview with coaches would have allowed for greater consideration of specific on-ice activities and may have allowed for a deeper investigation of coach decisions during practice activities.

The contribution of my current research is twofold. First, it provides a detailed analysis of how coaches navigate the independent youth hockey field. Second, it offers a meaningful critique of coaches' decisions and actions, and their consequences, for youth hockey parents and players in Alberta. While coaches used the term 'development' as their primary reason for transitioning to independent youth hockey, many of their decisions centered around an intense and prolympic doxa and the recruitment of individuals willing to buy in to an elite habitus. Coaches focused on creating value for players and their families, contributing to the broad social and cultural acceptance, and rapid growth, of independent youth hockey.

5.0 "50% to Sink or Swim": Development and Performance in a New Hockey Market

5.1 Introduction

The structure and governance of youth hockey in Alberta changed drastically in 2017 with the introduction of independent[26] youth hockey programs that operate outside of the purview of Hockey Canada and Hockey Alberta, the game's traditional governing bodies (Brind'Amour & Renney, 2019). These new, market-driven programs—some backed by private capital and deep-pocketed investors—have been increasingly popular with middle-class families, attracting nearly 10% of all youth players across the province. This represents a seismic shift, one that has eroded the power of the sport's traditional brokers, like Hockey Alberta, pushing the national sport further away from government oversight (Skilnick, 2017). In fact, the widespread emergence of independent hockey organizations may seem to be a grassroots "Albertan" rebuttal against traditional Canadian hockey governance, where most funding and support is prioritized for the most proficient and competitive athletes in the costly prolympic system (Donnelly, 1996).

Independent hockey leagues in Alberta now widely sell their youth hockey product to families that can afford it, marketing their services along the lines of specialized player development processes, and ascribing "a combination of free markets, political deregulation and privatization, individual self-interest, and inequality as the foundation for progress" (Coakley, 2011, p. 69). However, the cost and commitment required to participate in independent hockey (Decosse & Norcliffe, 2020) may, in fact, deepen and extend the exclusionary and outcome-based principles of prolympism (Ingham et al., 1999) and further intensify participants'

[26] Many terms have been used to classify this new hockey context including non-sanctioned, private, and independent. The non-sanctioned and private labels were assigned by members of Hockey Canada to portray these leagues as unsupported and unregulated (Skilnick, 2017). I have chosen to use 'independent' in this paper at the request of several of my participants and because it appears to be the most neutral choice. However, some participants more openly embrace the 'private' association, and I have left this term in their quotations.

commitment to pay-to-play, high-performance youth sport (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Additionally, the ascension of these values may obscure recent calls to democratize minor hockey in meaningful ways (Szto et al., 2020), encouraging a culture in which parents and young people experience the sport solely as consumers governed according to market principles (Brown, 2015). And, while these independent organizations claim to offer better and more well-rounded development opportunities for young players, little is known about how independent youth hockey differs from traditional youth hockey environments, and how it operates in developing and producing young hockey players under market conditions.

In this study, I examine how youth hockey in Alberta has transformed by critically analyzing the conditions under which independent youth hockey clubs emerged. I do this by examining how the independence of these organizations enables and challenges their capacity in supporting and pursuing player development in the competitive youth hockey market on purely economic terms. In so doing, I focus on outlining how taken-for-granted values of professionalization and commercialization now fully orient youth hockey according to market-driven logics in these new youth sport settings. I accomplish this by examining the social and relational aspects of independent, prolympic sport through the voices of independent youth hockey directors—the new producers of the youth hockey commodity. This study offers a unique critical sociological contribution by focusing on development in Alberta's independent youth hockey context, allowing for deep analysis of the neoliberal, corporate, and market-based pressures and principles that increasingly guide and shape the beliefs and actions of youth hockey directors in Alberta, as well as the experiences of families and young hockey players.

5.2 Literature Review

The erosion of amateur ideals that once dominated sport in Canada, and hockey specifically, accelerated in the 1960s and 1970, as the Canadian federal government began to shape a high-performance sport, embracing centralization, commercialization, and professionalization as *common-sense* values (Macintosh et al., 1988; Whitson & Macintosh, 1989). Macintosh and Whitson (1994) explained how professionalization began to effect taken-for-granted areas of Canadian sport like the integral position of the volunteer, as high-performance sport began to rely more on paid staff. Traditional volunteer structures and processes were not perceived capable of handling the increased demands of the emergent prolympic system or for the development of high-performance athletes (Jones, 1975).

The subsequent professionalization in governance and "the influx of full-time, managerial business-like professionals into what have been traditionally volunteer-run organisations" (Dowling et al., 2014, p. 522) coincided with the professionalization of other aspects of the sporting experience (i.e., paid coaches and players), resulting in an overwhelming focus on high-performance sport and winning (Ingham et al., 2002). At an operational level, professionalization has dramatically affected the management of sport by altering how athletes are recruited, retained, and trained (Taylor & Garratt, 2010). Beginning with the recruitment of more experienced coaches, organizations attempt to recruit and retain players in an increasingly competitive sport landscape (Decosse & Norcliffe, 2020). If organizations can demonstrate their ability to recruit and field competitive teams, they are more likely to attract competent members in future years (Edwards, 2016).

These pressures have long been dominant in the Canadian hockey system. Amateur hockey governance began in 1914 with the creation of the Canadian Amateur Hockey

Association (CAHA) when only amateur and semi-pro hockey players could represent Canada on the international stage (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993). In 1968, the Government of Canada incorporated Hockey Canada with the primary goal of improving Canada's international hockey performance with professional hockey players (Hoven, 2024; Scherer, 2021). By 1972, Hockey Canada had made significant progress toward their mandate, icing a team of professional, National Hockey League (NHL) hockey players, defeating the Soviet Union and reclaiming the top spot on the world stage, an accomplishment that had eluded Canadian amateur and semi-professional players over the previous two decades (Scherer & Cantelon, 2013). In many ways, the international success of Canadian professional hockey players and the dominance of the NHL in this era set the stage for further entrenchment of the prolympic system in minor hockey.

The social and cultural acceptance of prolympism as common-sense spurred changes to governance, disrupting established hierarchies and power relations (Gammelsæter, 2010). For example, the creation of Hockey Canada obscured the role of the CAHA, the existing amateur governing body (Scherer, 2021), and resulted in a series of struggles as each organization worked to define their authority and scope (Skirstad & Chelladurai, 2011). Hockey Canada's focus was primarily on international success in the new corporate era of the sport, although it overtook numerous responsibilities that were once the purview of the CAHA. After decades of contestation and jurisdictional disputes, the two organizations eventually merged in 1994 (Scherer, 2021).

Hockey Canada's dual mandate—ensure success in international competitions and promote mass participation (Stevens, 2006)—has always been a difficult balancing act. The former aspiration has always dominated the organization's agenda to create a prolympic structure by prioritizing elite levels, exclusive environments, performance regimes, financial investments,

and closed systems (Edwards, 2016).[27] Unfortunately, participatory goals and performance goals are often so disparate that actions to pursue one goal must necessarily draw away from efforts that can be directed toward the other (Skirstad & Chelladurai, 2011).

For example, the closed system was created through the formation of recruitment areas "based on registration numbers, geographic location, and travel time to the Host Minor Hockey Association" (Appendix "II", 2024, p. 135), serving goals of equity. In the closed system, governed by Hockey Alberta and Hockey Canada, athletes and their families had very little choice about where they could play; if they wanted to play on the most competitive team possible, they had to represent the top team *within their home region*. In a recent study of Edmonton Minor Hockey, Edwards suggested that a "closed system is relatively impervious to external penetration by environmental influence (e.g., politics, economics, or technology), such as the entrance of other competitive organizations (e.g., private hockey schools with elite-level hockey programs)" (2016, p. 20). Ideally, this closed system would offer an opportunity for youth to participate in their local area with a reasonable chance of being competitive against teams from other areas. However, the creation of a closed system in Alberta youth hockey had several unintended consequences, including perceptions of inequality, complacency, and a lack of competition between organizations that created a sense of dissatisfaction for many participants (Edwards, 2016).[28]

These tensions for Hockey Canada are particularly important in Alberta youth hockey as their dual mandate divides their resources and attention, creating an opening for individuals to

[27] In a closed system, players are forced to play in a region defined by their home address and are required to play only for teams within that region (Edwards, 2016). Hockey Alberta has traditionally implemented a closed system.
[28] Competition with independent youth hockey organizations, and declining registration in minor hockey due to residency-based requirements, have pushed Hockey Alberta to consider removing their residency-based requirements, a decision they will make in 2025 (Chini, 2024).

resist and produce alternatives to the status quo in the form of independent organizations. For the directors of independent hockey organizations, their autonomy allows them to solely pursue performance and development goals, while disrupting the stability and traditional hierarchy of governance that existed in Alberta youth hockey. Moreover, in operating according to market principles, they have forced open a previously closed system dominated by Hockey Canada and its member organizations (i.e., Hockey Alberta) that held all power in the form of a monopoly on the participatory rights of participants.

In stark contrast to Hockey Canada, independent organizations can circumvent broader bureaucratic constraints and territorial limitation with complete freedom to operate according to a new set of rules that are fundamentally market-focused (Brown, 2015). The directors of independent organizations do not need to appease a governing body, the Government of Canada, or even to necessarily attend to the participatory goals of an inclusive society or other democratizing prerogatives. They simply need to respond to consumers and to market conditions. Arguably, this provides a significant advantage to independent organizations as the divided agenda of Hockey Canada comes with "a pluralist nature that is extremely difficult to manage" (Gammelsæter, 2010, p. 569). Independence has, therefore, presented itself as an enormous opportunity for these organizations to be accountable only to themselves and their customers (Brown, 2015).

Directors of independent organizations, such as the Hockey Super League (HSL), have capitalized on the gradual cultural acceptance of independent youth hockey and have created entirely new programs, teams, and markets, effectively opening a previously closed system by allowing players to cross boundaries and travel long distances to play for the team of their choice (Edwards, 2016). In these new, open, "free market" systems, there is increased pressure

surrounding recruitment and retention. In Toronto, Ontario, for example, 13-year-old players are required to sign two-year contracts to join competitive teams in some local programs (Ogden & Edwards, 2016). This multi-year contract reveals an escalation of the commitment required to participate in an open, prolympic hockey system (Hughes & Coakley, 1991) and underscores the further commodification of youth labour in Canadian hockey.

Under these market conditions, independent organizations attempt to attract consumers by committing to "the development of every player" (Calgary Crusaders, 2023, para. 1), "long-term athlete development" (Vikings Hockey, 2023, para. 1), and the development of "well rounded individuals as well as athletes" (Airdrie Stars, 2023, para. 1). Independent hockey organizations in Alberta almost unanimously indicate that their primary mandate is to develop high-performance athletes and their increasingly specialized labour (Donnelly, 1996). However, a focus on development may not accurately reflect the true priorities of many sport organizations and may instead be a way for organizations to appear committed to the more appropriate goal of development while circumventing the critiques against their true commitment to hyper-competitive sport or their lack of attention to equity issues. Instead of pursuing a broad mandate, independent youth hockey locates itself within a prolympic sport landscape, particularly due to its elitist and meritocratic orientation (Ingham et al., 2002).

In this sense, the relative fluidity of the category of "development" in market conditions has caused it to become implicated with the pressures that created corporate and prolympic youth sport. Donnelly (1996) described how "dominant ideologies represent themselves as *the* way of thinking and behaving, rather than *a* way" (p. 2, emphasis in original). The seemingly inevitable ascendance of prolympism and free-market values appears to be making hockey in Alberta more demanding and exclusive and calls into question the role of independent hockey directors in

perpetuating a new corporate model at the expense of other equity issues. Still, it is unclear whether the corporate model of independent youth sport is an improvement from earlier structures of youth hockey: Do independent youth hockey organizations simply reinforce and extend the prolympic system? Under these competitive market conditions, do they tolerate or advocate for the exorbitant and potentially unsafe commitment as youth athletes look to pursue the sport ethic (Hughes & Coakley, 1991)?

It is necessary to understand the effects and pressures exerted on athlete development with the recent creation of independent youth hockey organizations, which may be partly explained by the perpetuation of intense commitments in accordance with the sport ethic (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Bowers et al. (2010) were particularly critical of independent sport contexts that are unprepared to handle the demands associated with sport. They explained that "the patchwork of private sports organizations remains an uncoordinated and unregulated mix of high- and low- quality organizations, each operating in its own way" (p. 176). Independence may give rise to *homo economicus,* an orientation that places neoliberal economic principles of entrepreneurialism, value propositions, and investment "across every sphere of its existence" (Brown, 2015, p. 33). When individuals begin acting in alignment with homo economicus, they approach everything according to market principles such as efficiency, competition, and individual (and market) freedom (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2001). It is important to understand independent youth hockey directors' commitment to development because exclusionary outcomes are likely to increase if directors prioritize economic, corporate, and prolympic ways of pursuing development (Ingham et al., 2002). Therefore, I ask: How do youth hockey directors understand and facilitate player development within a corporatized, independent, and prolympic sport system?

5.3 Method

A critical perspective will act as the foundation for this study, which will help to understand the ways in which directors are involved in the political, cultural, and economic facets of Alberta youth hockey, especially as they are influenced and pressured to act in certain ways (Markula & Silk, 2011). Directors are an increasingly powerful and important group who contribute the most to the momentum of independent youth hockey in Alberta. They have created leagues, organizations, and teams to address the apparent need (or "demand") for better hockey player development as expressed primarily by youth hockey parents. A critical approach makes it possible to interrogate these perspectives and aligns well with an interview methodology (Smith & McGannon, 2018). By studying directors, this study also responds to the call for critical research with the field of sport management (Sveinson et al., 2021) by creating a connection between sport management and sport sociology (Knoppers, 2015).

5.3.1 Participants

A recruitment email was sent to every eligible director of independent youth hockey organizations in Alberta to obtain a representative group of participants (Szto et al., 2020). As a result, a sample of 11 directors (9 male, 2 female) were recruited from independent programs in the Alberta youth hockey. The purposeful criterion-based sample of directors were involved in the delivery of independent programs for 11–15-year-old male youth hockey players in the Premier Hockey League (PHL), Junior Prospects Hockey League (JPHL), and Hockey Super League (HSL) (Patton, 2002). They had a variety of managing, coaching, and playing experiences in minor-, junior-, college-, and senior-hockey. Five participants worked full-time in

their director positions and received a wage, six participants were volunteer directors and did not receive any compensation whatsoever.[29]

5.3.2 Data Collection

Individual, semi-structured interviews were used to discuss how directors understood and facilitated development in their youth hockey organizations (Mayan, 2009). Markula and Silk (2011) indicated that interviews are an effective critical method because of the opportunity for "interviewers to interrogate the ideological structures and individuals' reaction to them" (p. 42). In addition, semi-structured interviews offered the balance between flexibility and structure and the efficiency and specificity to use of a theoretically supported interview guide (Patton, 2002). Seven participants completed their interviews in-person (at local restaurants and recreation facilities), while four interviews were conducted on Zoom. Interviews lasted from 33 minutes to 89 minutes (average = 65 minutes).

5.3.3 Interview Guide

A comprehensive interview guide was created and piloted with two directors to build primarily on topics related to development (Edwards, 2016), commercialization (Taylor & Garratt, 2010), professionalization (Dowling et al., 2014), and the sport ethic (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Interviews allowed directors to articulate why they decided to become involved in independent youth hockey and how they support development within their organization. For example, I asked questions such as: (1) Can you describe the reasons for the creation of your independent youth hockey organization? (2) What strategies are used to maximize player development, and how are those different from your previous experiences with hockey? and (3) Explain some of the sources of pressure that you perceive in your current position with respect to

[29] This research has been approved by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board under Pro00134273.

player development. Participants were excited to share their experiences and perceptions of both the challenges and opportunities in youth hockey that pushed them to create their own hockey organizations. Interestingly, Hockey Alberta conducted a "non-sanctioned hockey workgroup" in 2019 to understand independent youth hockey but did not include anyone participating in the independent context. These interviews with independent directors were well-received as one of the only opportunities for them to describe their youth hockey involvement. A complete draft of the interview guide is attached (Appendix C).

5.3.4 Data Analysis

To begin data analysis, I transcribed all interviews verbatim (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Then, I conducted my interview analysis according to a recently introduced 7-step interview analysis process (Markula et al., 2023). Step 1 of this process involved copying and pasting interview responses from all interviewees into a consolidated section for each question, making it easy to review one question at a time. In practice, I found that some responses overlapped. In Step 2, I identified "common themes in their interview answers for each question" (Markula et al., 2023, p. 7). Themes in this step were considered meaningful if they were often repeated, if they appeared to be problematic or contradictory, or if ideas seemed to be missing from the conversation (Boyatzis, 1998). A total of 111 initial themes were identified in Step 2. Step 3 involved comparing and condensing the list of themes in each section with the broader themes (Markula et al., 2023) of development, commercialization, and professionalization that are present in Alberta youth hockey. At the end of Step 3, eight working themes were identified. In Step 4, I developed three main themes and three sub-themes by cross-referencing themes in each section with the themes generated in all other reviewed sections. Step 5 initiated the writing process, where I integrated my analysis of the themes with participant quotes. In Step 6, I

connected the themes to properly locate my research within the bodies of coaching research and youth sport. Finally, Step 7 involved a deeper connection with theory, where I drew more heavily on sociocultural literature and a particularly strong connection was made with homo economicus (Brown, 2015) to extend my research and apply my critical perspective. Through this analysis I gained a deeper understanding of directors' prioritization of development that enabled me to describe the influences and pressures on independent youth hockey directors in Alberta.

5.3.5 Quality Standards

Several measures were employed to ensure the quality of this research. First, pilot interviews were conducted with two directors to ensure the clarity and suitability of the questions for research participants (Patton, 2002); one was a former director of a public hockey organization in Alberta, and the other spent a decade as a director in another sport. Participants were also given a two-week opportunity to review their interview transcripts to ensure the interview data accurately represented their beliefs and experiences. Only one participant contacted me about their transcript, asking for caution in using one section of the transcript to ensure there would be no negative employment repercussions. To honour this request, this data was not used. Finally, my supervisory committee acted as critical friends (Smith & McGannon, 2018) throughout the research, from the early planning stages all the way through the final stages of writing. These trusted voices encouraged me to consider different perspectives, provided constructive feedback, and helped me develop reflexivity as I worked to refine this work.

5.4 Findings and Discussion

Three primary themes emerged through the 7-step data analysis process: 1) 'every dollar devoted to development', 2) 'competitive advantages', and 3) 'give the consumer what they

want.' I now detail each theme to explain directors' planning and in pursuing development within their independent youth hockey organizations.

5.4.1 Every Dollar Devoted to Development

When participants shared their intentions for creating their own independent youth hockey organizations, much of their logic centered around the *value* they could provide to youth players through better development of specialized labour. This aligns with how prolympic sport advances the understanding that "the use and exchange value of athletic labor power is far more important than its use value alone" (Ingham et al., 2002, p. 309). In other words, investments in the development of specialized labour should prepare youth hockey players to compete at higher levels of the broader prolympic system. This is especially true for players in the HSL and JPHL, where, as Grant explained, players are afforded the benefit of "a vertically integrated model directly into junior hockey". The HSL and JPHL are owned by Silent Ice Sports & Entertainment (SISE; Silent Ice, 2023), a group that also owns the Spruce Grove Saints in the British Columbia Hockey League (BCHL) and the Seattle Thunderbirds in the Western Hockey League (WHL). It is, therefore, entirely possible for players to become part of the "reserve army" of labour for junior and professional teams through their participation in independent leagues that are integrated into the broader junior-hockey system.

Notably, six (Kieran, Calvin, Gavin, Morgan, Stephanie, and Marcus) of the 11 participants were volunteer directors. While these directors did not receive a salary at all, they were excited to be part of an organization that invested all income back into the development of skilled and potentially draftable hockey players instead of having money lost in the bureaucracy of minor hockey. Calvin, for example, highlighted that "all our money goes back into the kids." Kieran was in a similar situation, sharing that "we don't take a penny; spend all the money that

comes in and goes back to the team for ice, development." In some ways, this ethos harkens back to the days of volunteerism and amateurism (Jones, 1975), and an earlier era of minor hockey. However, in this instance, money is "going back into" to elite player development and a commitment to prolympism, which require greater commitments than traditional amateur contexts.

In addition, directors stressed that players receive more high-level programming in independent leagues than they can in other hockey environments. Independent leagues integrate this programming through carefully planned schedules that serve middle-class working families who subscribe to principles of early specialization and deliberate practice (Ericsson, 2020). Colin figured that "you're getting four years' worth of practice time in one year that you would get in a traditional minor hockey setting." This was a prime selling point for most organizations: they not only offered choice to consumers but also the certainty that dollars would go further to developing the children as elite hockey players (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2001). Directors in the JPHL extended the value of each dollar through their "centralized buying power" (Grant), which is possible because all 36 JPHL teams are owned by SISE. When booking ice, hotels, meals, flights, or buses, SISE uses the volume of their bookings as leverage for lower prices. Other teams also paid lower ice rental fees by booking ice during non-prime time hours,[30] in rural communities, and in the three arenas currently owned by SISE. This allows directors to spend money more efficiently and secure higher quantities of organized and intense practice to help their players pursue their goals (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Ryan believed players needed "to dedicate yourself to it. It's as simple as a 10,000 Hour Rule." Notably, the 10,000 Hour Rule is

[30] Prime time ice occurs from 8:00AM – 11:00PM on Saturday and Sunday, as well as 4:00PM – 11:00PM from Monday to Friday. One prime time hour of ice in the City of Edmonton is $329 per hour, while the non-prime time rate is $196 (City of Edmonton, 2024).

the assumption that 10,000 hours of dedicated training will allow a person to become an expert performer (Gladwell, 2008).[31] Independent hockey leagues can provide the conditions for this to occur as players increase their training intensity and volume to become true athletes (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). It is important to note that more training is not necessarily better, and participation in prolympic sport increases the likelihood of planned, intense, hyper-competitive, and potentially risky levels of participation (Donnelly, 1996; Ingham et al., 2002).

While some of these independent organizations generate a profit and others operate as non-profit organizations (i.e., all revenue must be returned to the organization), they have striven to cut out the bureaucratic inefficiencies of the traditional hockey structure to offer a neoliberal remedy dedicating more resources toward the pursuit of high-performance excellence (Donnelly, 1996). Directors highlighted the neoliberal, economic, and apparently apolitical values of productivity and efficiency as the strength of their programs and as their own form of "resistance" to rising costs, closed boundaries, and expensive bureaucracy. However, some participants were hesitant to share exactly how much their programs cost, but emphasized that they offered unprecedented efficiency (Gerschlager, 2005). Shielding me from knowing the total cost of some programs—which is their prerogative—demonstrates the secrecy that can accompany independent sport settings, and the dominance of prolympic and neoliberal ideologies that ensure directors have the freedom to choose how much, and to what end, money is spent (Ingham et al., 2002). In contrast, the costs for local minor hockey organizations are publicly available.

[31] While Gladwell (2008) popularized the 10,000 Hour Rule in his book called "Outliers: The Story of Success," his primary evidence for the principle was the study of deliberate practice (Ericsson et al.; 1993), where those with musical expertise had amassed an average of 10,000 hours of dedicated training. However, Ericsson (2020) stressed that most sport activities would not fit the original definition of deliberate practice (i.e., individualized design, repeated practice with immediate feedback, and individualized assessments), and that it is inaccurate to assume that success can be achieved based on the procurement of a magical number of practice hours.

Crucial social issues – how to make hockey culture more diverse and inclusive and the generational perpetuation of hegemonic white masculinity – are not priorities for independent directors. While public organizations like Hockey Alberta (2024) strive to support equity, collaboration, community, innovation, and leadership, a claim that requires scrutiny, independent organizations are under no obligation to engage with these values. Instead, they focus on areas where they have a clear advantage: economic capital and a centralized decision-making process (i.e., quick access to capital and value-for-money; Hall, 2017) to capitalize on the discretionary income of predominantly white, middle-class families who want the best high-performance experiences for their children. Amid calls for equity involving "the active promotion of hockey's multicultural history and increasingly diverse present" (Szto et al., 2020, p. 17), independent directors can continue to largely ignore questions of gender, race, and class, instead using their economic orientation to prioritize, value, and consider only market conditions in the prolympic system. These principles of value and efficiency mark the directors' explicit support and devotion to homo economicus: they communicate their willingness and desire to compete with other organizations and their understanding of youth hockey *on purely economic terms* (Brown, 2015).

5.4.1.1 Power Plays: The Independent Sector Strikes Back. Although I was not looking to make an explicit comparison between independent organizations and public organizations, many participants were quick to juxtapose their youth hockey organizations against other institutions typically described as public or traditional. For example, Colin (JPHL director) compared the cost of his programs with public teams competing in the Canadian Sport School Hockey League, many of which cost "$70,000/year. A lot of them sit between the $25,000-$40,000 range. At our price point [in the JPHL], all the money goes to the kids." Ryan

saw the role of minor hockey in providing an opportunity for lifelong participation but felt that tiering strategies, non-contact rules, and half-ice changes,[32] "were grounded in evidence-based studies, but I think the application failed." On the other hand, Grant believed that:

> You have to tear down the borders of governance, minor hockey, they're all in it for themselves. They create fences and silos, and they're all in it for their own registration dollars and stuff like that. And most of them are profit centers.

The emergence of independent organizations is, in a sense, a massive political statement from a group of economically oriented organizations who believe that it is possible for minor hockey to operate only according to "basic concepts of economic theory, such as equilibrium, competition, and completeness of markets" (Gerschlager, 2005, p. 32).

On several accounts, participants took arguments that are typically made against independent hockey (i.e., as expensive and exclusive; Bowers et al., 2010) and turned them back against minor hockey. Marcus, an HSL director, asked, "if Hockey Canada is as private as I am. It's the same federal corporation and the same structure. When the guy that runs Hockey Canada's getting paid $5 million bucks a year. Why isn't that called private hockey?" He elaborated:

> The HSL Athletic Foundation is a federally regulated and registered not-for-profit under the Corporations Act. That is the same organizational structure that Hockey Canada has,

[32] Hockey Canada traditionally organized players in descending tiers (e.g., AAA, AA, A, Tier 1, Tier 2, etc.) in age categories consisting of players from two birth years (i.e., U12 players could be 10 or 11 years old). This meant that the oldest player in an age division could be almost two years older than the youngest. In 2013, Hockey Canada removed body checking at all levels U13 and under to increase player safety; in 2017, they introduced mandatory half-ice hockey for players U9 and under to increase player engagement (i.e., puck touches, passes, shots, and playing time). Independent leagues typically run divisions for players from each birth year (i.e., 2011, 2012, 2013, etc.), introduce modified body checking at the U13 level, and completely reject half-ice hockey.

> and it's the same act. So, you've got these two private enterprises, because they're both absolutely private… And they govern hockey differently.

Hockey Canada has a storied history as "a nonprofit organization operating at arm's length from the Government of Canada" (Scherer, 2021, p. 42), although it has certainly operated like a private organization, one that has deepened and extended the prolympic model of youth sport (Donnelly, 1996). Hockey Canada receives some funding from the Government of Canada (i.e., $8.3 million in 2021, accounting for 13.4 percent of the total $61.9 million annual revenue; Gatehouse & Leung, 2022). This clearly connects the national nonprofit organization to the federal government, which can withhold funding if Hockey Canada fails to serve the public interest as demonstrated by a recent occurrence after Hockey Canada's mismanagement of sexual assault allegations in 2018 (Sadler, 2022).

Other directors were critical of the overly political nature of minor hockey in the former system, lamenting the nepotism, politics, and "backdoor bullshit happening everywhere. It's 100% affecting kids" (Corey). Gavin, for example, believed it was wrong that Hockey Alberta was "not paying their coaches but paying the executives. I'd like to see that all broken down." While youth sport has traditionally relied on volunteer coaches (Dowling et al., 2014), professionalization and privatization have introduced the era of paid coaches who have more time and energy to dedicate to coaching (Decosse & Norcliffe, 2020). Notably, some independent organizations pay their coaches while others have retained the position of volunteer coaches. However, directors also implement a variety of cost-management strategies including bulk ice purchases, parent coaches, and "breakfast club" skates (i.e., practices before the school day) that are widely accepted by participants and show directors' stewardship of team funds to advance high-performance development.

Colin believed the biggest issue with Hockey Alberta and Hockey Canada was their taken-for-granted monopoly status and the limits of the closed system they once governed: "Where else in our world would that be acceptable, where you can tell a parent what they can and can't do with their kid. And withhold rights and opportunities. Like take hockey out of it. Where would that be acceptable?" These critiques of public institutions further support homo economicus in the sense that the directors believed there was no room for "problematic politics" in youth sport, yet contribute to "converting the distinctly politic character, meaning, and operation of democracy's constituent elements into economic ones" (Brown, 2015, p. 17). They see themselves as "apolitical" producers of commodified youth sport, and little else.

5.4.2 Competitive Advantages

The mission of independent youth hockey directors is evidently centered around competitive economic priorities intertwined with a developmental narrative focused on winning and helping players ascend the high-performance, prolympic pyramid. Ryan explained, "we're here for development. But because this is private hockey, there are certain expectations to see success in terms of numbers of wins and numbers of losses." A taken-for-granted focus on winning, of course, seems to be an inevitable result of the prolympic orientation (Ingham et al., 2002). Some directors defended their own orientation towards winning, indicating that the focus should primarily be on "where a player started when he entered the program and where he is six months in, a year later, two years later" (Colin). Individual improvement is another necessity of prolympic sport, as is the concept of expendability, which reminds athletes that if they are not willing to put in the work to improve and succeed, they and their labour will be replaced (Ingham et al., 1999). Others, like Kieran, sought involvement in the independent setting specifically because of the higher-level of competition, sharing that it was "obvious at the time that this was

the highest level of hockey… it's the same type of people that are attracted to the HSL. Ultimately, they're very competitive people, and you can't help but try to win."

While greater competitiveness appeared to be foundational to the popularization of independent youth hockey, it also opened the door to more intense programming, commercialization, and elite reproduction (Coakley, 2011). The constant push to improve young hockey players was communicated by Ryan, who explained his strategy of "pushing the top 50% and essentially leaving the bottom 50% to sink or swim. Nine times out of 10, those kids in the bottom 50% will rise to the occasion." This quote further accentuates the expendable nature of athletes who cannot demonstrate their full commitment to sport (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Ingham et al. (2002) shared that "in the prolympic system, we often prey on their love to induce the work. We reward those who conform. The danger lies with the hyperconformists" (p. 320).

In addition to reproducing and extending the competitiveness of the hockey itself, independent youth hockey also intensifies competition between rival independent organizations in the emergent hockey market. Each organization needs to showcase player development in the prolympic system to retain existing consumers and to attract new ones. Corey explained the challenge he faces in retaining players year after year in this open market model:

> I would love to retain at least 60% of our players. I think that's an ambitious goal because with the landscape, it's very easy for people to just shop around bouncing from thing to thing to thing… If you happen upon a really talented kid, he's going to have option A, B, C, and D available to him.

This new unrestricted movement in the free youth hockey market is one of the most powerful influences on the heightened competition between organizations (Jansen, 2020). Even if organizations are not profiting, they are still subject to the economization of the environment in

the sense that they are forced to be efficient and to constantly compete for their "clients" (Brown, 2015). They are, in other words, caught in their own neoliberal webs.

One way to demonstrate the competence and preparedness of organizations to succeed in developing high-performance hockey players is to show how their programming enables athletes to quickly advance up the prolympic pyramid. Many directors assumed this is the one and only purpose of youth sport. Gavin noted, "that's the goal. Wherever they want to be – Junior A or [WHL] or wherever, it's our job to prepare them for that level." As more and more providers have begun participating in the preparation of athletes for elite levels of competition, the pathway for youth athletes is "completely automated into kids now, it's a standard for an elite level athlete to, at eight years old, not only play a hockey season, be full time in spring hockey, have a full-time trainer, private ice times, power skating" (Corey). The automation of this high-volume commitment further hints at both the rationalistic imperatives of the sport ethic (Hughes & Coakley, 1991) and the further entrenchment of a prolympic sport system in the factory-like labour conditions of youth hockey (Ingham et al., 2002). Prolympic practices have become so commonplace that few see the need to be critical of increasingly exclusionary and outcome-based environments (Donnelly, 1996). Ingham et al. (2002) reflected that "those of us who are critical of the performance discourse are nowhere near as popular as the more technocratically inclined" (p. 312). After all, members of prolympic sport are much more likely to pursue performance and competitive goals above inclusive, participatory, and developmental goals. Unfortunately, the decline of participatory goals disproportionally affects marginalized groups, further plummeting the likelihood that those from lower socioeconomic statuses or equity-owed communities will participate in sport (Szto et al., 2020).

5.4.2.1 Competition Drives Progress? Many directors felt that the inter-organizational competition forced organizations to be more responsible stewards of their athletes' development. In the open, free-market system of independent hockey, they are forced to attend to the needs of each individual participant to retain them. Gavin discussed how their organization strives to meet the needs of every child on every team, where only the top teams in minor hockey received such intentional care: "if you don't make that one team, you're kind of done. Like you're not considered if you don't get that elite training, and all the benefits that the AA kids get." Even more explicitly, Corey shared that in the traditional minor hockey system, "the worse you are, the less development you get," because players at lower levels were restricted from leaving the organization even if they were dissatisfied.

Grant also highlighted how independent directors listened to those involved in youth hockey to provide a hockey experience that offers an intense and competitive product, but one that did not necessarily infringe upon the everyday life of participants. He explained that the schedule of traditional minor hockey caused players to get "burnt out: go to school and grind from eight to three, come home, shovel in a meal, rip to the rink for practice. Come home, try to crack the books as a student; no time to be a kid." Grant is involved in the JPHL where team training is integrated into the school day: players will typically practice and workout in the morning, often receiving physical education credit for their hockey participation, and complete the rest of their academic studies in the afternoon. This is a major difference between traditional hockey environments and contributes to perceptions of independent youth hockey being more suitable for the balanced development of players, particularly owing to their alignment with players' education.

While proponents argue this as proof that privatization works, both public and independent youth sport carry the same prolympic torch: “the impact of this combined ideology is that it tends to reinforce and reproduce itself; it marginalizes alternatives; and it creates a momentum that tends to draw all sport in that direction” (Donnelly, 1996, p. 30). Silk and Andrews (2012) described how “the loosening or dismantling of the various institutional constraints on marketization” (p. 6) marks the beginning of a plethora of competitive, deregulated, and potentially exploitative ventures. Kieran, for example, discussed the way that hockey showcases (i.e., sets of three or four games played in a neutral location) created additional pressure for players through their elevation of competitive priorities. He explained that the HSL league executives “call them showcases for a reason. Don’t just call them games – call them showcases for parents and kids. My kid went to a showcase and now Uncle Bob believes there’s some scouts in the stands.” Kieran, whose organization participated in the HSL, was also critical of the name of the league itself. He explained how the decision of league executives to name it the HSL (Hockey Super League) “drives me crazy – delusions of grandeur – I’m embarrassed to say the name of it.” Independent leagues have certainly operated strategically in recent years, capitalizing on a growing number of parents whose “general mindset around the elite level group was that it was lacking” (Ryan) in terms of volume and intensity (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Rather than fighting in the same ring as well-established minor hockey organizations, independent directors mobilized their power and influence to compete against Hockey Alberta with a new set of rules (Edwards, 2016) focused on efficiency, competition, and individual freedom, which will be discussed in the final theme.

5.4.3 Give the Consumer What They Want

When asked about the impetus to start their organizations, directors explained that new teams and organizations were needed based on the dissatisfaction from previous experiences and the opportunity to offer choice to middle- and upper-class parents. Calvin shared that he and a group of parents on a minor hockey team were "just not happy with what we're getting. I said, do you want to try forming a team? Let's give it a shot. I called three or four parents. They said, we're in. We're in. We're in. We're in." This allows parents and coaches to capitalize on the "discretionary power of private capital" (Silk & Andrews, 2012, p. 6). Morgan believed that "kids and parents want more. Once they've been in a program like this, you probably won't convince them to go back…the level of product you're getting is just superior." With dozens of directors advocating for the freedom of each individual to choose the program that works best for them, the number of independent youth hockey teams in Alberta exploded from just nine teams in 2017-18 season to approximately 200 teams in the 2024-25 season, although this number could be even higher if league owners were not careful to manage growth (Grant).

This narrative is perhaps the most evident link to participants' alignment with homo economicus, as each director provides a service to potential customers (i.e., parents who have also demonstrated their willingness to participate in an independent free market), and "where there are only capitals and competition among them, not only will some win while others lose… but some will be rescued and resuscitated, while others will be cast off or left to perish" (Brown, 2015, p. 72). The most competitive and aspiring athletes, it seems, have cast off their need for local minor hockey organizations, but whether those organizations perish is yet to be seen. Certainly, they face far more competitive pressures than ever before.

The new free-market youth hockey landscape has drastically changed in the last decade in ways that offer far more choice for consumers. Grant explained that "you take down the borders and create borderless hockey. Now you create a free market. Now you have to earn your athlete and families' retention and loyalty to your program. You gotta work your butt off to do that." In a free market, "anybody can run their own program. And if there's value there, then people are gonna keep coming to it" (Mason). The (re)making of parents and players into "free agents" of the market implicates them in the "social relations of production and consumption that we have called the prolympic system" (Ingham et al., 2002, p. 320). Calvin, for example, explained how "my clients, or whatever you call parents. My clients want more. They feel they're not getting enough for their sons to develop properly." Referring to parents as clients instantly reclassifies interactions with them as economic and as commodity relations (Jansen, 2020). Importantly, there is an expectation in prolympic sport models that participants' labour value will increase as a result of their participation (Ingham et al., 2002). Therefore, proper development seems to refer to training that will 'produce' winners capable of benefitting financially by playing sport, particularly by facilitating the transition of labour from minor- to junior- and professional-leagues (Donnelly, 1996; Ingham et al., 2002).

As independent youth hockey first became available, minor hockey organizations opposed their formation by threatening to leverage suspensions for any player who was found to have participated on an independent team (Hockey Canada, 2023b). However, these suspensions were largely ineffective as consumers wanted the ability to exercise their freedom of choice and to participate in the free market. After all, the nature of homo economicus "configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as homo oeconomicus" (Brown, 2015, p. 31). Even parents who have continued registering their children in traditional

minor hockey can pursue a different option at any given moment. As Gavin suggested, “if you’re paying me, I want to make sure that you get the best development, that your child is developing as fast as they can, developing the most they can, within their ability.” If a minor hockey parent is unhappy with their experience, they now know that there are several directors, like Gavin, who will do whatever it takes to support the development of their child, providing they are willing to pay. Thus, the free market remains an option for even non-active participants in it, and all members (who can afford it) can reap the benefits sowed by the entrepreneurialism (Brown, 2015; Gruneau, 2017) and competitiveness (Silk & Andrews, 2012) of independent youth hockey.

5.4.3.1 Pressure to Pick the ‘Best Route’: The Customer is Always Right? With a continually growing number of options for youth hockey players in the province, parents’ selection of a hockey organization, according to independent directors, now resembles shopping for the family car. Calvin explained that “you have a Ford, Chevy, and Dodge. Which one do you prefer? I’m not gonna say that one’s better than the other because they’re all very, very similar models.” Similarly, Mason shared, “We’re proud of our option. Are we the right option for everybody? No. There’s other options out there.” While parents can select the option they believe will best meet their families’ needs, they cannot always evaluate potential programs with certainty, raising the potential for exploitation, especially under conditions of limited oversight. Instead, they must hope that directors’ behaviour is “guided by the social norms of fairness and reciprocity. While following these norms, [however,] agents might also act against their own self-interest” (Gerschlager, 2005, p. 36).

While there is some trust required for parents to register their children in independent youth hockey, Colin believed that this is comparable to the trust required to participate in minor

hockey, where “the amount of power, control, and money that used to exist” limited the options available. Marcus figured that “independent hockey can be as open and creative as the people that are running them. Or as limited as the people running them.” However, providers in the free market system of youth hockey are likely to embrace what Brown (2015) calls responsibilization, which encourages responsible participation by engaging “in a particular form of self-sustenance that meshes with the morality of the state and the health of the economy” (p. 84). In other words, the best way for directors to offer a successful and sustainable product is to dedicate their time, energy, and “a ton of resources to help these kids do what they want to do” (Morgan) to ensure they retain their parent customers.

In an entirely free market, there can be “people with agendas that aren’t in your kid’s best interest. And as a parent, it’s very easy to take the bait” (Buonocore, 2023, para. 109). Scherer et al. (2016) elaborated that neoliberalism creates environments “regulated by market interests and economic calculations as hypercompetitive individuals are compelled to accumulate human capital as consumer-citizens” (p. 188). However, many directors in my study provided candid advice for parents that demonstrated at least some resistance to the salesmanship that may be required for success in a neoliberal free market. For example, Grant stated that “we don’t believe in forcing these parents, families, athletes to fork over $40,000 or $60,000 for a grade eight education and experience on the ice. It’s insane, right?” (Grant). However, even the programs with which Grant is involved cost approximately $15,000, a clear indication that the price for competitive hockey in Alberta is rising across the board and that even taken-for-granted “lower prices” will require incredibly significant commitments (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). In response to rising costs, commitments, and competitiveness, Corey shared his dissonance when considering his participation in independent hockey and his belief that:

> All of it is too much at this point. We've created a monster in terms of obsession with something to the point that it's unhealthy… I think the dream that's being sold as a collective from everyone, is a very scary thing to do, because it's a very, very hard promise to keep. And it's a very cutthroat way to make a business.

According to Brown (2015), "liberal democratic practices and institutions almost always fall short of their promise and at times cruelly invert it" (p. 18). Because homo economicus gives rise to the possibility that every director could orient themselves economically, a focus on business-related decisions may be one of the probable consequences of participating in independent youth hockey.

5.5 Conclusion

In this paper, I have analyzed how directors pursue the mission of player development in independent youth hockey in a free and open hockey market. Their defiance of the closed system of traditional youth hockey environments in Alberta allows for the sport ethic to flourish and homo economicus to thrive in a prolympic system through the intense pursuit of efficiency, competition, and individual freedom. This has created an environment in Alberta youth hockey where relationships are governed by economic principles with competition and progress prioritized (Coakley, 2011). In contrast to Brown's (2015) description of neoliberalization as "more termitelike than lionlike" (p. 35), the emergence of independent youth hockey was swift and powerful, attracting a significant number of participants every year. While directors provided details on a broad range of development and competitive priorities, it is possible that every decision and interaction is influenced by economic motives. Consequently, directors who are interested in running a successful organization must ensure that their decisions serve their own interests first. In this new environment, "equality, liberty, inclusion, and constitutionalism are

now subordinate to the project of economic growth, competitive positioning, and capital enhancement" (Brown, 2015, p. 26). Goals of equity and inclusion have no priority unless they align with the high-performance consumerist goals that have become the new ethos within independent youth hockey in Alberta.

The implications of this study are complex. I offer the following recommendations for independent youth hockey directors in Alberta: 1) continue to leverage the low-risk advantages that could realistically improve the minor hockey experience by keeping lower costs and continuing to improve programming efficiency; 2) maintain and develop awareness of the implications of being economically oriented, and be realistic about what can be offered, and promised, to customers; and 3) consider ways inclusivity and equality can be injected into the independent youth hockey experience such as additional scholarship opportunities for members of marginalized communities. Future research could focus on closer examination of specific organizations to understand the level of investment on development for athletes, a deeper investigation of the specific environmental conditions that led to the emergence of a neoliberal alternative to minor hockey, and inquiries that could help to imagine and reinvent the role of national and provincial sport organizations in a new era of privatization.

There are two primary limitations of this research project. First, the participants were recruited from a total of 10 different organizations within the PHL, HSL, and JPHL. This study may have been able to provide more specific recommendations with a closer look at a more specific sample within independent youth hockey. Similarly, a more targeted approach may have revealed additional implications for communities, where there are fewer players and where the addition of an independent team could immediately restrict the operation of local minor hockey teams. However, the sample represents a large percentage (>10%) of independent organizations

in the province to provide some strength to the study. Second, the study does not provide concrete solutions for denouncing or exiting the economic sphere, an issue commonly faced when researchers imagine what it could look like to refuse participation in such a neoliberal context (e.g., Brown, 2015).

In this study, I sought to analyze the ways in which independent youth hockey directors facilitated player development. Within the free and open hockey market, directors have been able to advance the developmental and competitive agenda by capitalizing on a variety of economically oriented principles including value, efficiency, freedom, and competition. In the neoliberal province of Alberta, consumers have widely embraced independent programs such that their growth is likely to continue.

6.0 Conclusion

The purpose of my dissertation was to explore the ways in which parents, coaches, and directors navigate a new independent youth hockey market in Alberta, a field that invites prolympic (Ingham et al., 2002) and intense commitments to sport (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). This dissertation makes a significant contribution to understanding the forces and pressures propelling the rapid growth of independent youth hockey in Alberta through a critical sociological analysis. Through Lareau's (2002) concept of concerted cultivation, Bourdieu's (1978) concepts of field, doxa, habitus, and capital, as well as Brown's (2015) conceptualization of homo economicus, this dissertation has analyzed the pressures experienced by parents, coaches, and directors who have chosen to participate in the independent context.

My overarching research question was: How do parents, coaches, and directors navigate and negotiate their participation in a prolympic field of hockey player development? In this chapter, I begin by highlighting the key findings from each of my three studies that contribute to answering this question before providing a general discussion of the threads that connect each of my studies together. Next, I acknowledge the limitations of this research, and I propose several recommendations for future inquiry. I conclude with a final statement and reflection of my dissertation.

6.1 Chapter 3 Key Findings

The role of parents in competitive sport is increasingly demanding, as the time and financial commitments required of parents to sustain their children's participation continues to grow (Pynn, 2017). For middle-class parents looking to provide meaningful opportunities for the development of their children by facilitating their participation in independent youth hockey, however, the increases in costs and commitments are not only tolerated but often embraced

(Beamish, 2021). As parents are integral to the growth of independent youth hockey in Alberta, this study aimed to better understand how parents navigate the tensions, contradictions, and increased demands of their children's participation.

While the demands for parents were significant, parents largely supported the growing commitment required in independent youth hockey. Due to their dissatisfaction with previous experiences in traditional minor hockey environments or a desire for more professional programming for their children, many parents saw independent youth hockey as a welcome addition to youth hockey in Alberta. Even though independent youth hockey programming is generally more expensive than public minor hockey teams, parents highlighted the value offered by these new organizations through better coaching and more efficient programming. Most independent youth hockey organizations were also significantly less expensive than teams in the CSSHL, the contrast creating an easy decision for parents to choose independent youth hockey. From parents' perspectives, one of the primary benefits of independent youth hockey is its alignment with their children's love for the game.

Overall, I found that participation in independent youth hockey aligned with parents' attempts to reproduce middle-class values in their children (Bourdieu, 1978) through the practice of concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2002). In other words, parents considered independent youth hockey, while expensive and demanding, to be the context that offered the best chance for their children to develop in ways that would allow them to be successful in the middle class.

6.2 Chapter 4 Key Findings

One of the major claims of teams participating in independent youth hockey in Alberta is that they provide better development for youth hockey players. Much of the improvement in the developmental experience for youth comes along with the continued corporatization of youth

hockey in the province. Coaches are key to providing positive opportunities for youth in independent youth hockey as they navigate the increasingly prolympic sport landscape (Ingham et al., 2002). To further explore these topics, this study analyzed how corporate pressures in youth hockey affect their navigation of the prolympic system of player development.

Using Bourdieu's (1978) concepts, I found that coaches leaned into creating programs suited for competitive individuals from middle-class families. By choosing to coach within the field of independent youth hockey, coaches gained the freedom to pursue development in whatever ways they believed would be most appropriate. While coaches' intentionality and intensity supported a developmental orientation, there were several contradictions (e.g., limiting playing time for less skilled players) in the ways that coaches approached competition, suggesting an overarching prolympic (Ingham et al., 2002) and competitive doxa (Schubring et al., 2024). This doxa contributed to coaches' formation of a competitive habitus and influenced their recruitment of only sufficiently competitive individuals to the field. Coaches often navigated the context by facilitating the transmission of capital (i.e., culturally in the form of competitive experience for players and socially by granting player's access to their hockey networks) to players.

Although coaches seemed to be more influenced by competitive priorities than they expressed, it was clear their support for competitive practices are widely supported in the field of independent youth hockey. If coaches continue to make decisions that elevate competitive priorities, independent youth hockey will continue to thrive.

6.3 Chapter 5 Key Findings

While I have presented my research with independent youth hockey directors in the fifth chapter, the story of independent youth hockey begins with directors who disrupted the status

quo of hockey in Alberta by creating borderless, free-market sport organizations. Within the open system of independent youth hockey, participants can choose to participate on any team in the province, a marked transition from the previously closed system of minor hockey in Alberta. This transition has intensified the prolympic structure of youth hockey in the province, bringing the neoliberal values of efficiency, competition, and freedom to the fore.

Using Brown's (2015) definition of homo economicus, I explained how the actions and decisions of youth hockey directors tended to be governed almost exclusively by economic principles. Participants spoke about the downfall of bureaucracy, the values of consolidated structures, and the benefits of private capital. Directors were convinced that their independent youth hockey participation would allow them to dawn an apolitical stance within the province. This could be possible as homo economicus represents a transition from homo politicus toward a full commitment to economic principles when managing social relations (Brown, 2015). While directors are certainly able to offer benefits for participants of independent youth hockey, it also seems to be the case that equity and inclusion are even lower priorities within independent youth hockey. Directors should, therefore, continue leveraging the advantages of independent youth hockey in the province but also start to think of ways to balance their programs with inclusivity and equity.

6.4 General Discussion

As independent youth hockey was formed through the establishment of an entirely new field, Bourdieu's (1978) theory and a broader discussion of capital have been key to my dissertation. The exodus of parents, coaches, and directors from minor hockey occurred for a variety of reasons, including limitations of minor hockey structures and boundaries, pressures to train more competitive teams, and a growing cultural acceptance of non-traditional alternatives

(Decosse & Norcliffe, 2020). Amid increasingly competitive and corporate Alberta youth hockey, independent youth hockey identified a gap in the hockey market – between traditional minor hockey and the incredibly commercialized academies – and have since experienced steady growth. The unique elements of independent youth hockey programming generally revolve around the prolympic and neoliberal benefits that define their movement (Brown, 2015; Jansen, 2020).

For example, independent youth hockey teams generally practice more often, earlier, and with greater intensity (Stegmann et al., 2021), include more experienced and professional coaches (Taylor & Garratt, 2010), and encourage more competitive individuals and behaviours. Most of these practices seem to effectively align with the prolympic aspirations of youth players and their parents, as demonstrated by the widespread approval and expansion of independent leagues. While scholars have critiqued or cautioned about the professionalization (Dowling et al., 2014) and commercialization (Ingham et al., 2002) of youth sport, independent organizations, in practice, have experienced very little opposition from consumers. In fact, every one of my participants had positive experiences with independent youth hockey, even if they were a parent paying thousands per month on fuel, a coach investing significant amounts of time and energy toward their volunteer position, or a director navigating the challenges of player recruitment. Participants remained highly supportive of their involvement, instead focusing on the many benefits they experienced in independent youth hockey.

Because of the open and flexible nature of independent youth hockey environments, participants were afforded the benefit of voluntary participation. This allows parents, coaches, and directors to pursue the environment that they perceive to best match their – usually competitive – orientation in sport. If participants decide that the environment does not suit their

needs, they can simply look for a different organization. From a Bourdieusian perspective, much of the competitive orientation centers around the middle-class, or higher, lifestyle that independent youth hockey supports (Erez & Shoshana, 2023). For instance, while practices are frequent and structured, they are strategically scheduled to better support the busy schedules of middle-class families. While programming is professional and competitive, it supports the middle-class narrative that sport can provide the skills necessary for youth to thrive in a middle-class life (Lareau, 2002; Stefansen & Aarseth, 2011).

While independent youth hockey participation may not present any immediate difficulties for parents, coaches, or directors, one of the most significant findings from Chapter 5 was the adoption of homo economicus by youth hockey directors. This finding could also be extended throughout this dissertation, as every relationship and interaction within independent youth hockey has the potential to be defined, governed, and manipulated according to economic principles. For example, volunteer coaches must be prepared to professionally provide training and development opportunities, else their efforts will be overlooked for a coach who can provide what consumers may consider to be more appropriate programming. In this way, the neoliberal principle of competition constantly pressures individuals to act a certain way (Hall, 2017). Similarly, parents and players can now consistently evaluate their participation based on the efficiency or value they receive (Ojala, 2020).

While independent youth hockey has been overwhelmingly embraced by the participants interviewed for this study, there are several shortcomings that should be noted. For example, independent youth hockey has not solved any issues related to equity or opportunity for youth hockey players in the province, simply providing another increasingly prolympic (i.e., competitive, demanding, and exclusive) sport environment. Additionally, there remains limited

oversight for independent youth hockey organizations (Bowers et al., 2010), leaving questions related to risk and liability unanswered. This is especially relevant considering the inclusion of body contact at younger ages that traditional minor hockey environments. How could independent youth hockey organizations track injuries across their many leagues and divisions? If this is possible, would independent organizations reverse their decision to include body contact at younger ages? If competitive goals are ultimate in independent youth hockey, how can goals of participant safety, experience, and inclusion be considered?

6.5 Research Limitations

The breadth of the independent youth hockey field cannot be understated. From the beginning of my doctoral research to the end, the number of teams and players participating in independent youth hockey increased by over 300% (i.e., from 60 teams to over 200 in just four years). The rapid growth of the PHL and HSL, along with the introduction of the JPHL in 2022 and the introduction of the FHL in 2024, presented additional challenges to effectively identify the scope of the current research. Additionally, by following the critiques of independent youth hockey presented by Hockey Canada and Hockey Alberta (Skilnick, 2017), I chose to focus on the PHL, HSL, and JPHL as the culmination of the prolympic influences that I identified in my literature review. The CSSHL, however, involves higher commitments and prices than any independent league, so it may have been effective to include participants with experience in the CSSHL, even though they operate under the auspices of Hockey Canada.

My focus on team coaches made it difficult for me to draw conclusions that related specifically to on-ice and individual player development. While there tends to be greater quantities and earlier exposure to professional programming (i.e., broad considerations), I was not able to critique specific developmental activities. This is largely because team coaches are

only responsible for delivering approximately half of the on-ice programming for their teams. Specialty skills coaches, who focus on foundational, positional, or individual skills like skating, shooting, and goaltending, are responsible for the other sessions. Specialty skills coaches tend to work with many teams and contribute much more than team coaches to the commercialization of youth hockey in Alberta, in both public and independent contexts. Inclusion of specialty skills coaches' perspectives and coaching practices would have strengthened this area of the inquiry. Another perspective missing from the investigation are those who were dissatisfied with their independent youth hockey experience; these perspectives may have added some additional consideration of the disadvantages or shortcomings of independent youth hockey. By interviewing current parents, coaches, and directors, the findings largely reflected a halo effect, with limited critique of the context by participants. I also acknowledge that the voices of young hockey players themselves are missing from this research, and future studies would benefit from examining the experiences of youth in contemporary sport.

Finally, while my critical analysis drew from Bourdieu (1978), Lareau (2002), Brown (2015), and Hughes and Coakley (1991) to conduct a meaningful critique of independent youth hockey, I have made few recommendations for transformations that could cultivate more opportunities in sport for individuals from equity-owed communities. This demonstrates the challenges facing youth hockey and is a reminder that this is the first academic research to closely examine the emergence and rapid growth of independent youth hockey organizations. This research could, therefore, provide a foundation for future inquiries that could propose solutions to the problems facing independent youth hockey, particularly related to its prolympic orientation and exclusive properties related to cost and commitment.

6.6 Future Research Directions

There are several areas related to independent youth hockey that could be further understood through additional research. First, a more specific investigation could examine the specific effects of independent youth hockey on rural or small-town organizations. While most of my participants were from large urban areas, the few individuals from smaller communities highlighted the more drastic impact that new programs had on their local community organizations. Where a public organization in a large urban center may be able to continue operating effectively with the loss of hundreds of players to independent youth hockey, a small community may be devastated by even a modest loss of participants. Additionally, the recent response from Hockey Alberta to remove residency-based requirements and allow youth players to play for any team in the province demonstrates the profound impact that independent youth hockey has had on their governance in the province and warrants further investigation (Chini, 2024).

Second, a more targeted study could examine the specific on-ice activities of head coaches and skills coaches across the different types of programs in Alberta. I observed practices from each of my coach participants, but I was unable to discern meaningful differences in the content of the specific on-ice developmental activities. Future research could examine on-ice activities in public, independent, and academy settings to compare the specific approaches to development, and to assess programs that offer academic credit for sport participation. This research could provide more explicit answers to my questions regarding development and may offer additional advice to parents or coaches choosing between different contexts, programs, or organizations.

Beyond Alberta, future research should take a wider lens to examine how independent hockey leagues are reshaping the landscape of Canadian youth sport. A national study could assess their impact on minor hockey associations and broader outcomes such as player development pathways, league sustainability, and commitments to equity and inclusion. More broadly, scholars should investigate how the prolympic orientation of sport—marked by privatization, specialization, and performance-driven models—is influencing not only hockey but also the structures, practices, and values of other youth sport systems across the country.

Finally, there are two areas of research that could be undertaken to advance goals of equity and diversity within Alberta youth hockey; these include 1) the introduction of the Female Super League in 2024, and 2) the operation of independent junior hockey leagues (e.g., the Western States Hockey League, the Western Provinces Hockey Association, the North American Hockey Association, the Canadian-American Junior Hockey League, the Canadian Premier Junior Hockey League, the National Junior Hockey League, and the Greater Metro Junior A Hockey League). Importantly, these independent junior leagues have generally operated close to communities with high Indigenous populations because "many First Nations governments pay for their children to play hockey. And these 'junior teams' line up for the cash!" (The Junior Hockey News, 2019, para. 10). Is it even possible within the prolympic and neoliberal market to uphold values of equity and participation in hockey? Do these female- and Indigenous-focused initiatives make any attempt to increase the quantity and quality of opportunities for equity-owed communities, or are nefarious economic goals the foundation of their operation?

6.7 Conclusion

My dissertation has analyzed and critiqued the emergence and acceptance of independent youth hockey in Alberta. Through my three studies, I have examined the perspectives,

experiences, and contributions of parents, coaches, and directors as they navigate the independent and prolympic field. I began this dissertation by outlining a variety of prolympic forces that underpin this independent movement. While these factors are powerfully prevalent, my critical sociological investigation of the context allowed me to analyze the various ways participants navigate independent youth hockey. Participants were drawn to the context through a variety of factors, including perceptions that parents could better reinforce their middle-class habitus (Lareau, 2002), opportunities for coaches to commit more completely to a competitive doxa (Bourdieu, 1978), and inspiration for directors to lean into the neoliberal values of value and efficiency to attract participants (Brown, 2015).

Many of these influences have contributed to the further intensification of youth hockey participation (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). While independent youth hockey is in some ways creative and innovative, in others it remains entrenched in histories and traditions that make it expensive and exclusive. With financial backing and widespread public support, I expect that independent youth hockey will continue to grow, and I wonder whether this will perpetuate the decline of minor hockey numbers in the years to come. With the expansion of prolympic pressures as "common sense," will youth hockey see a further separation of social classes? I reminisce about my own early days of training on the backyard rink, and again I wonder whether I would have chosen to play hockey competitively with youth hockey moving toward a prolympic approach to player development, or if my parents would have been able to afford it. What does the future of hockey in Canada look like, and how many children might be excluded, as equity and inclusion are sacrificed and prolympism pushes youth hockey *From the Outdoor Rink to Development Inc.?*

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Appendix A

Interview Guide – Parents

Hi there, I'm Dallas and I'm going to be the one talking to you today. First, I want to thank you for helping with this project. I'm going to be asking you some questions about your experience with hockey in Alberta. More specifically, I'm going to ask you questions about what development means to you and how you see development supported in the private context. I anticipate this interview will take somewhere between 45 minutes and an hour. Does that sound alright to you?

Introduction

1. To start, could you tell me your name and where you're from?
2. Please describe your level of education and your current occupation.
    a. Probe: Would you describe your family socioeconomic status as low-, middle-, high-, or something in between?
3. Can you describe your first experience with ice hockey?
    a. Probe: What other roles have you held related to hockey?
    b. Probe: Have you also been involved in other sports?
4. What kind of involvement in Alberta youth hockey do you currently have?
    a. Probe: Have you been involved before in another capacity?
5. How old is your child(ren) and how long have they been participating in ice hockey?
    a. Probe: Why did you register your child in ice hockey in the first place?
    b. Probe: Can you describe the sport involvement of your other children?
6. How long have you and your family been participating in private youth hockey contexts?
    a. Probe: What was the primary reason that you chose private hockey?

b. Probe: Does your child plan to continue in private hockey moving forward?

Development

1. What do you think of when I use the word 'development'?
    a. Probe: Can you describe your expectations of development for you child?
2. What do you hope your child gains from their participation in ice hockey?
    a. Probe: In what areas would you like to see your child develop?
    b. Probe: Has your child made friends, learned skills, and become better at hockey?
    c. Probe: Do you have any goals related to your child's participation in ice hockey?
        i. Probe: Higher levels? College hockey? Other?

Professionalization

3. Describe the reasons related to development that explain why you chose to register your child with their current hockey organization.
    a. Probe: How does the organization strive to support your child's development?
    b. Probe: How did you learn about and choose private hockey for your child?
    c. Probe: Is this program run better than other programs you have experienced?
    d. Probe: Did the Hockey Canada scandal influence your decision?
4. How important is it that your child(ren) have professional coaches and programs?
    a. Probe: What kind of playing or coaching experience tells you that the coaches are prepared to help your child(ren) develop?
    b. Probe: What do you know about the coaches of your child's team?
    c. Probe: How do you feel about hiring paid coaches at this level?
    d. Probe: Please describe the interactions you have had with the coaches of your child's hockey team.

Commercialization

5. What is the cost of participating in private hockey?
    a. Probe: Do you feel that you get what you pay for in terms of programming?
    b. Probe: Would you view this cost as an investment?
    c. Probe: Some programs in Canada cost tens of thousands of dollars. At what point would the additional costs be too much?
6. How does the private league compete in terms of exposure for your child(ren)?
    a. Probe: How concerned are you about your child's ability to be scouted while playing in this league?
    b. Probe: Is the U15 draft something that is on your radar?

The Sport Ethic

7. Please explain how your commitment to support your child's development in ice hockey has evolved since first registering them in the sport.
    a. Probe: Can you describe the role that you play related to your child's development through hockey?
    b. Probe: What are the demands on you as a parent of a youth hockey player?
    c. Probe: Can you describe the typical weekly commitment?
        i. Probe: Have you ever felt that the commitment is too much?
    d. Probe: Are there any sacrifices that your family has had to make for your child to participate in private youth hockey?
        i. Probe: If so, who would you say has made these sacrifices?
8. What can you tell me about the interactions that you have with other people involved in private hockey, including the parents and coaches on your team and other teams?

   a. Probe: What engagement have you noticed with the referees in this league?

9. Can you describe any concerns that you might have regarding private youth hockey or Alberta youth hockey more generally?
   a. Probe: Do you ever think about how the rising costs and commitments excludes families who can't afford to dedicate so much money and time to hockey?
   b. Probe: How do you feel about young athletes committing to play only hockey at an early age?
   c. Probe: At what age do you think a player should specialize in hockey if they play at a more competitive level?
   d. Probe: How could the private hockey experience be improved for your child or your own involvement?

Conclusion

1. What advice would you have for other hockey parents who may not be as familiar with private hockey in Alberta?
   a. Probe: When might you recommend that parents look to private youth hockey for their children's hockey goals?
2. Are there any questions that you think I should have asked you about your experience with development in Alberta youth hockey?
3. Do you have anything else to add about your experience in Alberta youth hockey?

If you think of anything else that you would like to share, feel free to contact me. You can also contact me if you have any questions. Thank you very much for participating.

Appendix B

Interview Guide – Coaches

Hi there, I'm Dallas and I'm going to be the one talking to you today. First, I want to thank you for helping with this project. I'm going to be asking you some questions about your experience with hockey in Alberta. More specifically, I'm going to ask you questions about what development means to you and how you see development supported in the private context. I anticipate this interview will take somewhere between 45 minutes and an hour. Does that sound alright to you?

Introduction

1. To start, could you tell me your name and where you're from?
2. Please describe your level of education and your current occupation.
3. Can you describe your first experience with ice hockey?
    a. Probe: What other roles have you held related to hockey?
    b. Probe: Have you also been involved in other sports?
4. What kind of involvement in Alberta youth hockey do you currently have?
    a. Probe: Have you been involved before in another capacity?
    b. Probe: What are your long-term hockey or coaching goals?
5. How long have you been a coach in private youth hockey and why did you choose this route of hockey coaching?

Development

1. What do you think of when I use the word 'development'?
    a. Probe: How is development pursued in the private youth hockey context?
2. How do you approach player development in your current context?

   a. Probe: In what areas do you prioritize a player's development?
   b. Probe: How do your coaching principles or philosophies guide your coaching?

3. What do you think must be present in a hockey environment to properly develop youth hockey players?
   a. Probe: What experiences do you have to prepare you for supporting the development of these young hockey players?
   b. Probe: Explain how you balance development and performance.

Professionalization

4. In what ways has your view of development changed since becoming involved in ice hockey?
   a. Probe: What new ideas or technologies allow you to better develop players?
   b. Probe: Are there developments in research or practice that inform the way that you coach?
   c. Probe: Do you complete training, attend conferences, or do anything else to prepare for the development of players?
5. Can you explain the role of decision-making related to your coaching experience?
   a. Probe: What information do you consider when planning for the season?
   b. Probe: What is involved in the process of planning for each practice?
   c. Probe: Recruiting, scouting, seasonal plans, personnel?
6. How much interaction do you have with the directors of your organization?
   a. Probe: How much do they influence your actions or decisions as a coach?
   b. Probe: How do you experience the performance and financial pressures in private hockey?

c. Probe: Are there other influences or pressures that you experience in your role?

7. Explain some of the sources of pressure that you perceive in your current position with respect to player development.
    a. Probe: How would you describe the expectation of successful performance?
    b. Probe: How do private leagues compete in terms of player exposure?
    c. Probe: Do you feel pressure to prepare players for the U15 draft?

Commercialization

8. Please describe the interactions that you have with parents on your team and with parents from other teams.
    a. Probe: How would you describe their support and expectations of you as a coach?
    b. Probe: Please describe the commitment required from parents and their children.
9. What skills or experience do you bring to your coaching that sets you apart from a volunteer coach?
    a. Probe: What is your view on the role of volunteer coaches in youth hockey?
    b. Probe: What do you think coach compensation at the private youth hockey level will look like in 5 or 10 years?

The Sport Ethic

10. Describe the commitment that you believe is necessary for a coach to successfully develop players.
    a. Probe: Can you outline your weekly or seasonal commitment to coaching?
    b. Probe: Are you involved with other hockey jobs or roles as you coach this team?
    c. Probe: What kind of compensation do you receive for your coaching role with this team?

   d. Probe: Do you feel that the compensation is fair considering the amount of time and energy that you commit to coaching?

11. Can you describe any concerns that you might have regarding private youth hockey or Alberta youth hockey more generally?
    a. Probe: What is your perception of the reasons for the Hockey Canada scandal?
    b. Probe: Do you ever think about how the rising costs and commitments could exclude families who can't afford to dedicate so much money and time to hockey? Is there a point where you feel the cost would be too much?
    c. Probe: How do you feel about young athletes committing to play only hockey at an early age?
    d. Probe: At what age do you think a player should specialize in hockey if they play at a more competitive level?
    e. Probe: How could your current private hockey experience be improved?

Conclusion

1. What advice would you have for other hockey coaches who may not be as familiar with private hockey in Alberta?
    a. Probe: Would you recommend other coaches join you in private youth hockey?
2. Are there any questions that you think I should have asked you about your experience with development in Alberta youth hockey?
3. Do you have anything else to add about your experience in Alberta youth hockey?

If you think of anything else that you would like to share, feel free to contact me. You can also contact me if you have any questions. Thank you very much for participating.

Appendix C

Interview Guide – Directors

Hi there, I'm Dallas and I'm going to be the one talking to you today. First, I want to thank you for helping with this project. I'm going to be asking you some questions about your experience with hockey in Alberta. More specifically, I'm going to ask you questions about what development means to you and how you see development supported in the private context. I anticipate this interview will take somewhere between 45 minutes and an hour. Does that sound alright to you?

Introduction

1. To start, could you tell me your name and where you're from?
2. Please describe your level of education and your current occupation.
3. Can you describe your first experience with ice hockey?
    a. Probe: What other roles have you held related to hockey?
    b. Probe: Have you also been involved in other sports?
4. What kind of involvement in Alberta youth hockey do you currently have?
    a. Probe: Have you been involved before in another capacity?
    b. Probe: What are your long-term goals related to hockey?
5. Can you describe how youth hockey in Alberta has changed in recent years?
    a. Probe: How does your organization fit within youth hockey in Alberta?

Development

1. What do you think of when I use the word 'development'?
    a. Probe: How is development pursued in the private youth hockey context?

   b. Probe: What strategies are used to maximize player development, and how are these different from your previous experiences with hockey?

2. What is the mission or vision of your organization?
   a. Probe: Who was involved in the creation of the organizational mission? Would every coach and parent be aware of the organizational mission?
   b. Probe: What steps do you take to ensure that the organizational mission is successfully pursued?
   c. Probe: What are the main barriers that you see in pursuing the mission (and effective player development)?
   d. Probe: What would you describe as the primary goal of your organization? Is it different than what is represented in the mission?
      i. Probe: Advancing athletes? Generating a profit?
3. What is the role of sport directors in providing developmental opportunities?
   a. Probe: How can you effectively demonstrate your commitment to development?
   b. Probe: What other priorities affect your ability to focus on development?
   c. Probe: Explain how you balance development and performance.

Professionalization

4. Describe how the expansion of private hockey in youth sport has influenced the way development in youth hockey is pursued in Alberta.
   a. Probe: How does private hockey work best to support player development?
      i. Probe: How is this better than public hockey or academy options?
   b. Probe: How might the higher costs of academy and private hockey influence better player development?

5. What importance do you place on professional coaches or coaches with professional playing experience?
    a. Probe: How does your organization's schedule or structure support the better development of players?
    b. Probe: Are there any other reasons why private hockey could be the best place for hockey player development?

Commercialization

6. Can you describe the reasons for the creation of your private youth hockey organization?
    a. Probe: What are the financial goals of the organization?
7. Can you describe your organization's process of recruitment and retention of coaches?
    a. Probe: How much does a coach typically earn by coaching in your organization?
    b. Probe: What do you feel your paid coaches bring to the table that a traditional volunteer coach would not?
    c. Probe: How have paid youth coaching positions changed in the last 10 years and where do you see it going in the next 10 years?

The Sport Ethic

8. What has the recruitment of youth athletes and their families been like?
    a. Probe: How are athletes recruited to your organization?
    b. Probe: What kind of interactions have you had with parents during recruiting?
    c. Probe: What are the typical barriers for families to join your organization?
    d. Probe: How has your organization grown in recent years?
    e. Probe: Are there any efforts to ensure that families from lower socioeconomic statuses can participate in private hockey?

9. Explain some of the sources of pressure that you perceive in your current position with respect to player development.
    a. Probe: How would you describe the expectation of successful performance?
    b. Probe: How do private leagues compete in terms of player exposure?
    c. Probe: How important is it that players are prepared for the U15 draft?
10. What are your thoughts on the recent Hockey Canada scandal?
    a. Probe: How do you safeguard against this type of event in private hockey?
11. Can you describe any challenges or concerns regarding Alberta youth hockey?
    a. Probe: At what age do you think it is appropriate for children to choose hockey as their only sport?
    b. Probe: What effort is made to keep costs of youth hockey down for participants?
    c. Probe: What is the role of your organization to keep hockey welcoming and inclusive?
    d. Probe: How could your current private hockey experience be improved?

Conclusion

1. What advice would you have for those in Alberta not familiar with private hockey?
    a. Probe: In other words, what kind of player (or family) should participate in private youth hockey?
2. Are there any questions that you think I should have asked you about your experience with development in Alberta youth hockey?
3. Do you have anything else to add about your experience in Alberta youth hockey?

If you think of anything else that you would like to share, feel free to contact me. You can also contact me if you have any questions. Thank you very much for participating.