

Draft Dodgers

Written by Ryan Van Horne

Saturday, 12 June 2010 11:43 - Last Updated Sunday, 13 June 2010 11:24



A draft is supposed to be a league's way of leveling out the playing field.

Call it egalitarian, socialist, counter-evolutionary – even naïve – but as long as leagues award the top pick to the worst team, we have to operate on the assumption that by using such a system, leagues are trying to offer a hand-up to the cellar-dwellers. If that's the case, why do the Canadian major junior leagues allow prospects and the fat-wallet teams to game the system?

You've heard it before many times. Matt Duchene, Angelo Esposito, Austin Watson – just to

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name a few -- are players who said they were going to play NCAA and even made commitments to schools. Eventually, they changed their mind and chose the major junior route.

In each case, they were drafted later than they would have gone had they said they intended to play major junior.

I can sympathize a little bit with a player who wants to find the best development opportunity or who might want to play somewhere for educational reasons. Heck, I can even sympathize a bit with a player who might like to play closer to home. If that's the case, though, just say it; be up front about it.

When a player says he's going to go the NCAA -- and has no intention of going -- it's dishonest and what I call gaming the system. If a player is seriously considering the option and says it depends on who drafts him, I don't have a problem with that because it's honest. At least that way, the bottom feeder team that has a chance to draft him knows that the kid wants to play major junior and can leverage that to get something more for their high pick.

Remember, the draft is its designed is supposed to level the playing field; leagues are trying to help the cellar dwellers.

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One way major junior leagues can clear the air a bit is ask all players who are interested in playing in their leagues to declare their intentions to enter the draft. This would not void their NCAA eligibility, however, and some might argue that everybody would just do it anyway to keep their options open. That could happen, but at least then the player has provided some clarity and they and their camp of advisors/parents have to be up front.

A player who clearly wants to go the NCAA route, such as top-ranked prospect Michael Matheson of the Lac St. Louis Lions, would not have declared earlier this month. It would have reduced the intrigue at the QMJHL draft in Drummondville and there would have been no hushed silence when the Quebec Remparts scout went to the podium and drew a hushed silence from the crowd when he announced their pick at No. 14 by beginning with “The Quebec Remparts are happy to select, from the Lac St. Louis Lions ...”

Quebec selected Matheson’s teammate Patrick Walsh instead, but given past shenanigans, there were some who were still not convinced of Matheson’s intentions – myself included.

The QMJHL has financial penalties if they prove that a team gamed the system, but proving that can be difficult and one wonders if it’s enough of a deterrent. Some say it is.

In the OHL, the practice still goes on. This year, top prospects Nick Ebert and Matia

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Marcantuoni went late in the first round. Ebert went to the 2011 Memorial Cup hosts Mississauga St. Michael's Majors at No. 17 and Marcantuoni went to the Kitchener Rangers at No. 18.

Mississauga is not usually considered one of the have teams in the OHL, but in this case, they're playing that role of getting a highly-rated prospect well below where he should have gone in the draft.

The NHL draft is approaching and it's rare for players to try and game the system of the best league in the world. There have been some examples of that in the past – and Eric Lindros is probably the most famous. In that case, Lindros simply said he refused to play for Quebec, but Quebec drafted him and traded him for a mother lode of talent including Peter Forsberg, Mike Ricci, and Ron Hextall. That trade worked out pretty well for the Nordiques because they realized Lindros was the best talent and they took him because they knew he wanted to play in the NHL.

Many major junior teams don't realize that kind of gain because teenagers have options and teams are afraid of drafting a top-ranked prospect and going through the hassle of trading him. Major junior leagues should do a better job of compensating teams that draft a highly-touted prospect who doesn't report. This would encourage more of them to take a chance on drafting top prospects and trading him if it turns out that major junior is the option the player prefers.

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The OHL has a system by which a team gets a compensatory second-round draft pick if someone they took in the first round doesn't report. For example, Kitchener took Cam Fowler in the first round in 2007 and he didn't report so they threw him back and got a second-rounder.

That's good, but it could be beefed up. That, and asking players to declare for the draft, would help keep things above board.

ONE-TIMERS: Hockey Canada names its roster for the world junior team evaluation camps and there were a few names that stuck out. I was happy to see that left-winger Kyle Clifford, profiled in an earlier Panning for Gold column was invited. When Clifford entered the OHL, he was drawing comparisons to Shayne Corson. At this stage of his career, those aren't quite warranted because he doesn't demonstrated Corson's offensive skill, but the Los Angeles Kings' second rounder plays the same kind of gritty game. It was also interesting to see that Hockey Canada again invited Zack Kassian, despite his legal troubles and a washout season in 2009-10. The 2011 tournament will be held in Buffalo and if the tournament were in Europe on a larger ice surface, players such as these two, Carter Ashton, Taylor Beck and Brad Ross might not have been invited. That's a lot of truculence invited to the development camp.