



## FCA Hockey Advisory Services

This document has been created to assist parents and players as they navigate the junior, prep and youth hockey environments with their sons. As a parent of 2 junior hockey players, I have tried to document things that I have learned that may help you along your son's journey. Having played both junior hockey and college Division 1, I want to share as much as possible with you as well as tell you that there is no "perfect path". My wife and I learned this the hard way with our sons and would make different decisions now than what we made during their junior years. One key piece of advice that I have for you is to pray over each decision and then have patience while you wait for the Lord to direct your path. You cannot screw up your son's journey as long as the Lord is guiding it. Make the best decisions with the information you have and leave the rest up to the Lord. Each situation is unique, so please consider this information general guidance not to be relied upon in your own individual situation without further consultation, but I hope this document helps you during this time. Feel free to reach out to me if I can help you in any way.

### Evaluating U16/U18, Prep and Junior Opportunities

1. I always tell parents to keep their player home as long as possible. The criteria below will help you decide / evaluate if the home opportunity is still a good fit or if another program is better.
  - a. The top criteria to evaluate your home situation is the Coach who will be coaching your son's team. Does this coach have the ability, knowledge and experience to help your son reach the level of play that he wants to get to. If so, then you can overlook some less important things that your program might not have in order to receive the coaching you might not get somewhere else. How long has the coach been coaching? Who are the assistants and how long have they been there. What is his reputation and experience in development young men? Do the players that play for him develop and move on to higher programs? Today, many programs have young, inexperienced head and assistant coaches who are just starting to coach. They might have played at a high level but they may have little or no coaching experience. Experience comes from doing, so finding an experienced coach is usually better than a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> year guy who is just learning the ropes. Final point, do your homework on the coaching staff and listen to what others say about them. Ask a lot of questions before you commit to a program and the questions should start with the Coach.
  - b. Other criteria to consider when evaluating an opportunity are listed below. They should all be considered when making your decision.
    - i. Cost analysis of the program (what you get for your money). Number of games, practices, skills sessions, off ice training, meals, travel, etc. Each program is different, some include these in their costs, others do not. Some programs talk about additional skills sessions but they are either canceled or packed with players. Do your homework on what you are getting for your money.
    - ii. Skill level of the team as well as opponents (great to practice with really good players but also important to play games). Development is the key, where your

son will develop the most. Who are the games against and how many are quality games?

- iii. Who are the other staff members including skills instructors, strength coaches, goalie coach, medical support, etc. What is their background / experience? Is there high turnover among staff or are they stable.
- iv. Look at the amount of games played, tournaments team is playing in and showcases they are in, both home and away. What is the travel schedule and how will that impact school, work, rest, family, etc.
- v. Amount of estimated playing time your son will get. Does the coach play all players, 4 lines or just 2 or 3 lines. How many scratches are there each game. Will he play specialty teams. These are questions you should ask during the recruiting process.
- vi. How professionally is the organization run. I recommend that parents reach out to at least 2 different parents from the prior team and ask about how things are being run. Do you get what you pay for? Would they send their son back to this program again based on the year they experienced?
- vii. Where is your son projected on the depth chart. Coaches have a hard time telling people they will be 4<sup>th</sup> line but they need those guys on every team.
- viii. What is the player living situation, billet, dorms, team chaplain? How do they pick billet families? Do they have enough billets or do they have to pay for billet referrals? How many billets leave the program every year and why? These are questions to ask other parents, probably not the coaching staff.
- ix. Have past players dealt with mental health issues because of the coaches? This is happening in programs today where coaches are verbally abusing players and leading to mental health issues. How many players have left last year's team who are eligible to return? What are the reasons for them leaving? You might want to talk to one of these parents.
- x. Overall stability of the program, major changeover of staff is a sign of turmoil.
- xi. Where are the players going to who age out and or leave this program? Does the program move players to the next level? Ask the coach for players names who have been moved up.... Get details (look at website, do your research).
- xii. Does the program have the leadership and supervision you want for your son? Are coaches the role models that you want your son to emulate?
- xiii. Proximity of the program to your home. How close is it and how many games / visits can you make to see your son. This is important especially if your son is younger and leaving home for the first time.
- xiv. How many returning players are there and how does that impact playing time.

#### **Key things to remember during the recruiting process:**

1. **Programs present their best look during the recruiting process. Most are very good at selling their programs, it is a huge part of their job. Understand that many will make you feel really special in order to get you to sign their agreement and once completed will move on to the next player.**
2. **During the selection process, you have most, if not all of your leverage during the recruiting process. Ask questions, do your due diligence, this is a big decision and you want to make sure you take your time. Most deadlines are created by the coach to get people to sign quickly. If they want you, they will most likely wait to get you.**

3. Do not be afraid to ask questions and dig into the weeds... it is way better to find stuff out on the front side over finding out once you made your decision.
4. Ask about what happens if the situation does not work out. How do I get a release? Refund or Credit.
5. Try to negotiate a payment plan that works for you. The longer the payment process, the more leverage you hold on to. Do not prepay or pay all money upfront or at once.
6. Should I sign a tender (an offer by a team to play for them)? Coaches try to use tenders to get players to commit to their program. Signing a tender means you are committed to playing on that team (if you make it) but only if you play in that league. Tenders are generally good for players but can limit you moving forward. Talking to your advisor and discussing the option is the best thing to do.

**Evaluating College Opportunities – Most colleges, including Div 3 and Div 1 ACHA teams, prefer players with at least 2 years of Junior experience. With the new CHL changes (allowing Major Junior Players to play NCAA Division 1), along with the portal, Division 1 opportunities are extremely hard to earn. We are seeing a major shift in Tier 2 and expect to see many changes in the junior leagues over the next couple of years. The days of going to 1 college and playing 4 years are gone as many players will play for 2 teams during their college career.**

Questions for college coaches.

1. Tell me about the stability of your college program?
  - Several players commit to a school and then the coach leaves or is fired.... this leaves a player in a tough spot.
  - How well do you match the style of play of the team you are interested in? Do they play a speed game, for example, and you might not be a speed guy?
2. Other questions for the staff are below.
  - a. How long has the head coach been there? The assistants? (3 or 4 Coaches have already been let go this offseason and more will be).
  - b. Does the coach have a long-term contract?
  - c. Is the coach an alumnus of the school? If not, he can be more apt to leave.
  - d. How many players from this team enter the portal each year?
  - e. What has been the team record the past few years?
  - f. How many players have turned pro from this school or been drafted from this junior team? Where did players move on to?
  - g. Is the coach a Transformational or Transactional Coach? Does he believe in transforming his players no matter their skill level or does he see coaching as a transaction?
  - h. Is the coach a Christian? Is he open to having Christians on the team if he is not? Is there a team chaplain or other supports for Christian players?
  - i. What is the team's culture like?
  - j. How many players are committed to your program for the year I am committing?
  - k. Have you had to decommit players in the past couple of years? If so, why?



- l. What year are you recruiting me for?
  - m. Where do you see me fitting in on your team? What is my role?
3. What style does the team play? Does this style fit my style of play? Will I fit their style of play? What style of play is the league (BCHL is known for more-scoring than the NAHL for example).
4. How many openings does the team have next year (by position)? How many graduates? How many recruits are in the incoming (or my) class? I know some schools that bring in 10-12 players a year and have them compete for 3 or 4 spots.
5. What is the breakdown of upperclassmen or returners?
6. What year are you looking to bring me in (this is very important for college teams as they might want you to play 2 or 3 years of juniors prior to coming)?
7. What is the travel schedule like? Where is the team located, how much school is missed? Closest airport? Close to family?

Talk to players on the team as well as a former player or two as they are more apt to share freely about their experience with this program and coach.

**Information on selecting a College team. I know several college coaches that have taken over programs over the past couple years and have had to cut upperclassmen players. Pick a school you will be happy with attending if you lose hockey for some reason (coaching change, injury).**

1. Is the school a large school or small school? What size school fits me better?
  - a. Am I better in small classes, or a small-town environment?
  - b. Does the school have tutors for athletes?
  - c. Am I a small or large campus guy (some campuses have 20,000 plus students opposed to 2-4,000)?
2. What are the school's facilities like? Own rink on campus? Housing for players?
3. What league does the school play in?
4. What kind of scholarship funds are available for me? Are there NIL (Name, Image and Likeness) dollars available for players (compensation paid to NCAA athletes to promote, partner or represent brands).
5. Does the school fit academically? If I couldn't play hockey would I be happy at this school? Does it have my major that I want to study?

### **The best way to reach out to a school or program**

We must understand that coaches get hundreds of emails a week from players interested in their programs and do not have time to respond to each of them. Therefore, we must be smart in how we reach out to them.

1. **The most effective way to reach a coach is to have someone who knows the coach well reach out to the coach directly on your behalf. This will speed up the process in a major way.**
2. If no one who you know has that relationship with the coach, then the next step would be to have your coach, or your advisor, email the coach to introduce you. You might need to write the email for your coach, this is good because you can follow the steps below to improve the possibility of getting a response back. \*You must understand that if you reach out to a coach the first call the coach will make will be to your coach, your coach must believe you can play at this level.
3. The final step is for you to reach out to the coach directly.
  - a. Keep the email short and to the point.
  - b. Have a strong subject line
  - c. Include most important facts in the first 2 sentences (goals, points, awards, etc.).
  - d. Include a link to any online data from your team, league, elite prospects
  - e. Include a link to some video highlights (needs to be short clips, not full games and you must be able to highlight you during the video).
  - f. Need to include coach and or advisor info to follow up with
4. Most colleges / junior teams now have their own prospects camps that help pay for the assistant coaches as well as identify a few prospects. These can be good to showcase your talent if you are a top player. If not, save the money and use it on a skills camp / training to make you better until you are ready to showcase your talent.

### **How to gauge interest from a coach / organization**

Below is some information for you as you start to evaluate your summer opportunities.

1. Emails are the easiest way to connect with people, so if you get an email invitation to something that you would like to attend, you should do the following:
  - a. Send an email back asking a question about the camp / opportunity.
  - b. Encourage a phone call to get additional information and gauge interest.
  - c. Research the camp with your coach / advisor and see if they think it is a good opportunity for you.
2. Phone calls are the second step and if someone is genuinely interested he will call you or your coach / advisor directly.
3. A scouting visit to watch you play is usually the next step in the process to show interest in you.
4. Being drafted is always a great indicator of interest level, although not being drafted, but receiving a phone call before or after the draft does show interest as well.... Just not as much commitment.

Players can and do get noticed at an open camp, but the chances of this are small. It is always better to go to a camp where the coach knows who you are and someone (your coach or your advisor) calls the coaches to tell them you are coming. This will separate you from all the other attendees and possibly give you some extra visibility / opportunity to get noticed.



If you are not getting phone calls / invites, or, you are not being introduced to the camp staff by your coach or advisor, you are not being put in a great situation for success at that camp. The probability of something happening that you want (you make the team) is low. You must do the work up front prior to the camp.

**In terms of skills camps, specialty teams and summer training, below are my thoughts.**

- You need someone or some group advocating for you as a player / person, so if you do not have that from your coach, then you should try to find that through an advisor or another coach.
- We bring teams to the Pre-Draft Showcase (May) and Chowder Cup (July) to help players grow spiritually, connect with other players (Fellowship), to get them better (working with a new coach) but mostly to connect with them so we can help them identify the best options for themselves moving forward next year. Hockey should still provide enjoyment and summer hockey through FCA can and does do this. We want to invite each of you to join us for an event this summer so we can get to know you better and help you over the upcoming months find the best opportunity for you moving forward.
- Summer should be a time to rest your body and not a time to over play. **Most parents have a hard time telling people NO, turning down an invitation to play on a team or attend a camp. You need to be very selective in your summer training and goals for the summer.** Very few players are discovered over the summer... coaches want to see people play in games that are meaningful, not summer hockey. Ask your coach or advisor how much you should do and what your summer goals should be and then make the hard decisions (usually involves saying NO).

### **Which Junior League is best for me?**

#### **USHL / CHL**

– All players would like to play in the USHL and now with the new changes the CHL (NCAA eligible). Almost every player in the USHL has been drafted or protected by their team. It is very hard to make a USHL / CHL team as a free agent but it can be done. If you go to a camp and make the team, they will need to release a player who they have drafted if they want to sign a free agent.

- USHL and CHL teams have import and age rules and they do recruit from around the world.
- The USHL does have an under age and an overage draft every year.
  - o You can skate with a USHL team during the season and or attend pre draft camps to get noticed. You must be a top player on your team or conference / league to think you will have a chance to play in the USHL. You must have something in your game that separates you as a special player to play in this league.
- Many USHL / CHL players start out in another Tier 2 league and move up to the play Tier 1.

#### **NAHL / BCHL / OJHL / AJHL / MJHL / NDC / Other Tier 2 Leagues**

- There are many Tier 2 leagues now with many teams and opportunities for players.



- The NAHL and NCDC both have drafts (as well as the NA3HL) as well as they can offer tenders to sign with their club. Tenders do not guarantee a spot on the team but they do lock you into that team if you play in that league.
  - Turnover of coaches and players in Tier 2 is high, as players are cut, traded and dropped when better players become available. Rosters will have as many as 50 players over the course of a year based on the staff so make sure you review the team before you commit to it.
  - You must research the team to see how many players they rostered the past year and what happened to rostered players over the course of a year
  - Coaches are under pressure to win as well as get college commitments, not necessarily develop players
  - Tier 2 players end up playing in Division 1 and Division 3 college hockey as well as ACHA Division 1.
- You must understand your position on the team prior to signing on with a tier 2 team. If you are a bottom 6 forward or a 7-9 D, you may not be happy with your playing time and may be happier looking for another team in that league or down one level. It is very hard to move up into the top 4 or 6 during the course of the season if you are not there to start with.

### **Tier 3 Leagues**

- The pay to play leagues across the country provide an opportunity to play juniors for many players.
  - The number one reason to play in a tier 3 league is to give yourself another year to develop before college or moving up a junior level
  - Players can and do move up a level but you need to excel at the Tier 3 level to do so. You need to be one of the top players in your league / conference to move up.
  - The key to picking a Tier 3 team is the coach. Will the coach help you develop in the areas you need to develop to make it to the next level? There are tons of coaches out there, but few really good teachers / mentors for young men

### **Advisors**

Many of you will ask the question, When do I need an advisor as well as How do I pick one for my son?

As stated above, the time to pick an advisor is when you need help making these decisions for your son. Good advisors will listen to your needs and then work with you to help make the best decision for your family. Advisors can open up doors for players, but it has to be the play of your son that speaks for itself.

When evaluating advisors, do your homework. Do you know any players that have worked with this advisor before. What are they saying about him and did he provide what was needed. Advisors can charge \$2-5k for their services per year. Ask questions of the advisor just like you are asking a potential coach. Do your homework because you need to work with this person closely over the course of the year.



I hope this document has helped you think about things that you might not have known and provides some guidance to you. As I said up front, feel free to reach out to me or the staff at FCA Hockey as we would love to talk with you about your hockey situation.

Blessings,

Rick  
Rick Randazzo  
FCA Hockey Director  
[rrandazzo@fca.org](mailto:rrandazzo@fca.org)