

Hockey season is far too long



Once upon a time, not so long ago, hockey was a winter sport.

With the expansion of the National Hockey League in the past two decades, playoffs have stretched into May.

International hockey has also helped to lengthen the hockey season with the Canada Cup in September. It is now possible for hockey fans to watch their favorite sport nine months per year.

Nine months is a long hockey season for any players, but for professionals it is their livelihood and even the teams that reach the Stanley Cup final get a minimum of three months off the ice.

NEW CONCEPT

At the minor level, a new concept has arrived on the scene in the past couple years, "The 12 month season."

British Columbia's best teenage hockey players are being asked to play year-round.

One of the best examples is the Best-Ever Program, designed by the B.C. Amateur Hockey Association.

The association established the competition to identify elite players turning 16 years of age for national and international competitions.

Players from every region of the province competed in training camps, in April, to earn berths on zone teams. The six district teams are competing in a tournament this weekend, at Kamloops. The Okanagan Zone squad includes five Vernon players.

46 PLAYERS

Following this weekend's tourney, 46 players will be selected for a provincial midget camp July 21-28, at Duncan, on Vancouver Island. The top players will then attend the Pacific Region Camp for B.C. and Alberta which leads to the Quebec Cup event next winter.

After the Pacific Region Camp, in early-August, the players will have about one week off the ice before Western Hockey League teams open their rookie camps.

From this corner, the Best-Ever Program looks

like a waste of time, money, and talent.

If the BCAHA wants to identify its best prospects, let the association scout them during the regular hockey season. The WHL has an efficient scouting system which allows teams to pick top players at age 12 or 13.

HOGWASH

Best-Ever organizers claim Dave King, coach of the Canadian Olympic Team, will scout the series of games as part of his recruiting for the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary. Hogwash!

The players participating in the Best-Ever Program this year are 15 and 16 years old . . . in 1988 they'll be 18 or 19. How many 18 year olds do you think will be on Canada's Olympic Team?

Most junior hockey officials are opposed to hockey in the summer. Marc Pezzin, general manager of Kelowna Wings, said players who are on the ice for 12 months per year risk the danger of burnout.

"There is only so much hockey you can take, both mentally and physically," Pezzin said. "It won't take long for these players to dislike the game."

He doesn't want his prospects on the ice all summer. "We encourage our players to take it easy in the summer. We have conditioning programs for them . . . off the ice."

Carl Enemark, president of Vernon Lakers, said competition for the top players is the prime reason for the spring and summer hockey programs. "Everybody is trying to beat everybody else to the best players," Enemark said. "Hockey should be played in its proper season, not June or July."

DROPOUTS

Enemark feels many top players will drop out of hockey once they reach junior. "More and more players will be quitting when they are 17 or 18 years old," he said. "They will want to live a normal life and they'll find out there is more to life than hockey."

It is time to ask the question, "Are the officials who promote these programs doing it for the players . . . or themselves?"