Legitimate pathway to professional ranks or career termination?

An empirical investigation of USPORTS men's hockey from 2000-2018

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Abstract: The purpose of the current investigation was to empirically evaluate the career progression of USPORTS men's varsity hockey players to understand if USPORTS men's hockey is a legitimate pathway to a professional playing career. To address this, USPORTS men's varsity hockey rosters, from 2000-2018, were captured and analyzed for athletes who progressed to play professional hockey. Findings indicate that 1,391 USPORTS athletes progressed to professional ranks between 2000-2018, a number representing approximately 70 players, on average, per season. Drawing on expectancy value and legitimacy theories, the findings revealed that USPORTS men's varsity hockey is a legitimate athlete pathway for players to reach professional levels of competition.

Keywords: USPORTS, Professional Careers, Legitimacy, Athlete Pathways

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Introduction

An athlete's pathway in sport is influenced by several factors (i.e., government and organizational policies, opportunity to advance, resources, politics, organizational reputation). What becomes important to consider in any athlete pathway is the design of the system and the transition points that enable advancement to higher levels of competition (Edwards & Washington, 2015). For some athletes, the end goal may be to represent their country at the Olympics; for others it might be to compete professionally, while others might want sport to be a catalyst to obtain an education, funded by a scholarship to compete at an academic institution. Thus, the chosen pathway of an athlete can be influenced by the established legitimacy of that pathway, and/or the perceived legitimacy of competing pathways, as a reflection of an organization's ability to meet the goals of the athlete. Indeed, given that competition is ubiquitous in most sport and business contexts, Brouwers et al. (2012) recognized the importance of examining sport-specific systems as a means of understanding the effect of competing organizations within a system. As Lock et al. (2015) explained, "Legitimacy emerges when organizational activities align with constituent expectations" (p.362). Here, and in all cases of an organization establishing legitimacy, management must convince stakeholders of the value, and appropriateness of the organization (Golant & Sillince, 2007; Suddaby & Greenwood 2005) to meet consumers' expectations, in light of competitive offerings.

Related to the current investigation, Ogden and Edwards (2016) identified hockey as a sport with a rich empirical setting to examine different systems and explore different challenges facing the sport. For example, in their study on channels to hockey's highest professional ranks, Edwards and Washington (2015) identified the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I, along with the Canadian Hockey League (CHL), as two legitimate pathways to professional hockey and, more specifically, to the National Hockey League (NHL). To be sure, the authors indicate that the competition between the NCAA and CHL, for the most talented Canadian hockey players, is fierce (Edwards & Washington, 2015). Here, it is no secret that a primary goal of the CHL is to produce hockey players who will develop to compete professionally, ideally in the NHL. In a similar vein, the NCAA pathway has emerged as a viable passageway to hockey's highest level. Where the NCAA was "[o]nce a hidden gem of hockey talent, college hockey has become one of the biggest suppliers of talent to the NHL, surpassing all of Europe" (College Hockey Inc., 2021, para. 8). Here, Division I schools have produced an increase in the number of college players who have advanced to play in the NHL since the turn of the century. College Hockey Inc. (CHI), a third-party representative of NCAA Division I hockey teams for recruiting players, indicates that between 2003-2019 there has been a 12% increase in NCAA players competing in the NHL (from 21% to 33% of league totals) (College Hockey Inc., 2021); 327 former college players were on NHL rosters during the 2018-2019 season (College Hockey Inc., 2021). To be sure, the NCAA has produced

an average of more than 60 current or future college players in the last 15 years, and teams continue to scour the NCAA ranks for free agent signees as well. The 2016 NHL Draft featured a record 11 NCAA players selected in the first round, and the 2019 NHL Draft saw the most NCAA picks in 12 years. (College Hockey Inc., 2021, para. 7)

Thus, in the past two decades, recruitment communications for College Hockey Inc. have been focused on messaging around the NCAA as a pathway to hockey's foremost league. "College hockey, in short, is the fastest growing development path for the NHL" (College Hockey Inc., 2017, para. 4).

Absent from any discussion, on pathways to professional hockey being considered legitimate, is the

Canadian equivalent to the NCAA: USPORTS. This governing body is comprised of four associations that are geographically delineated across the country. These organizations include the Atlantic University Sport (AUS), Réseau du sport étudiant du Québec (RSEQ), Ontario University Athletics (OUA), and the Canada West Universities Athletic Association (CWUAA). Danylchuk and MacLean (2001) describe USPORTS as a model operation of amateur athletics; the focus on opportunities for student-athlete participants to excel in the classroom, and on the field of play, drives the organization. Indeed, USPORTS' vision is, "To provide exceptional experiences which empower today's student-athletes to be tomorrow's leaders" (USPORTS, 2019, p. 6).

Considering the athlete perspective, like the NCAA, USPORTS promotes its offering as a platform to hone playing skills in a competitive environment and to facilitate opportunities for student-athletes to compete at higher levels (USPORTS, 2019). Indeed, the 2020 USPORTS Annual Report highlights the organization's view on developing student-athletes for 'more': "Chase the Glory recounts a student-athletes' journey, or pathway, to achieving excellence in the classroom and on the field of competition, highlighting the physical and mental determination required for each individual to reach their team and personal goals" (USPORTS, 2020, p.8). Here, personal goals could encompass myriad things, including development to play professionally. While not as high-profile as the NCAA, quality training facilities and access to superior coaches, some of whom also work in the national coaching system, are available in the USPORTS system (Chard et al., 2013b; USPORTS, 2019). However, while this access to qualified instruction and quality amenities is a part of the promotional presentation of the USPORTS brand, Miller and Kerr (2002) found that Canadian university student-athletes, in general, have a level of resignation regarding opportunities for developing professional sporting careers through the Canadian university sport system. To this end, overall, Canadian university sport has a perception problem (Braes & Edwards [In Press]; Shoalts, 2016). In the context of USPORTS men's hockey, specifically, the perceived associations with legitimacy of the Canadian university pathway, for developing professional careers, are understood to be similarly unfavourable. For example, Chard (2013) explained that while Canadian university hockey was perceived to be an outstanding product, with high levels of competition and skill, ultimately, it was seen as "the end of a young player's hockey career; at least professionally" (p.335). This perception of the USPORTS men's hockey league being insufficient, and/or a pathway that is not a legitimate option for accelerating professional playing opportunities in the future, however, has yet to be empirically assessed and, therefore, is largely anecdotal.

Thus, the purpose of the current investigation was to empirically evaluate the career progression of USPORTS men's varsity hockey players to understand if USPORTS men's hockey is a legitimate pathway to a professional playing career. Indeed, removing anecdotal assumptions and understanding pragmatically, through a legitimacy lens, if USPORTS is a conduit for alumni to enjoy professional careers is the goal of this research. Thus, the questions guiding the investigation were:

RQ1: How many players have played professionally after skating in USPORTS?

RQ2: Are any of the three conferences (AUS, OUA, RSEQ, and CWUAA) more/less prolific at sending players to the professional ranks?

RQ3: Are certain institutions more/less prolific at developing future professional hockey players?

RQ4: If progression occurs, where (i.e., countries) do USPORTS hockey players play professionally?

RQ5: How many USPORTS hockey players have achieved the pinnacle of hockey excellence (NHL)?

We draw on the work of Suchman (1995), who noted that legitimacy is understood as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed systems of norms, values, beliefs and definitions” (p. 574). Furthermore, Zimmerman and Zeitz (2002) note the importance of legitimacy as it “provides a basis for decision-making” (p. 416), and that, “most of the time, people do not have clear and complete evidence that a given action is the best or the only way to accomplish a goal, or that one goal is better than another” (p.146). Through this context of legitimacy, the current research looks to aid our understanding of the number of players competing professionally, after developing in the Canadian university hockey league. This empirical analysis might then be used to discern if USPORTS should also be considered a legitimate pathway to reach hockey’s professional levels, combatting current perceptions of the league as one where careers conclude (Chard, 2013).

The importance of this research thus is two-fold; first, the data collected for this study can be used by USPORTS management (i.e., coaches) to shape the messaging around the viability of USPORTS as a pathway to professional hockey. Second, this research aims to add to the literature on legitimacy and hockey pathways; here, understanding if a competitive level can be utilized by athletes to transition to the next, is valuable. Indeed, there are multiple organizations competing for the most talented athletes, forcing coaches of these organizations to present factors that make their programs attractive in a recruiting context; empirical data substantiating and/or refuting organizational claims or existing perceptions are undoubtably constructive.

Literature Review

Athlete Pathways

For an athlete to reach an elite level, they need to be able to enter and move through athlete pathways, transitioning from one level to the next (Green, 2005; Ogden & Edwards, 2016; Sotiriadou et al., 2008). Here, athlete pathways are the linkages between different levels of a sport and are referred to as transition points (Green, 2005). In Canada, moving from minor hockey to junior hockey, to university hockey, and then to professional hockey, are examples of transition points. Scholarly research that has examined athlete pathways (also identified as an Elite Sport Development [ESD] System) is quite extensive (e.g., Böhlke & Robinson, 2009; Brouwers et al., 2012; De Bosscher et al., 2006; De Bosscher et al., 2009; Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Ogden & Edwards, 2016; Sotiriadou & Shilbury, 2009; Strachan et al., 2011). A gap that exists within this research area, however, relates to understanding hockey pathways, other than the NCAA and CHL. Specifically, a quantitative analysis of the Canadian university system, to understand its viability as a legitimate transition point to professional hockey, is absent.

Professional Hockey

There are many professional hockey leagues around the world (e.g., NHL, American Hockey League [AHL], East Coast Hockey League [ECHL], DEL/DEL2 [German professional hockey league], Liiga/Metis [Finish professional hockey league], Kontinental Hockey League [KHL], ERSTE BANK EISHOCKEY LIGA [EBEL; Austria professional hockey league], NLA/NLB [Swiss hockey professional hockey league], Elite Ice Hockey League [EIHL; Great Britain professional hockey league], and Metal Ligaen [Danish professional hockey league]). These professional leagues differ in size and/or competitive level; for example, the KHL is arguably a

superior league to the EBEL given the number of former NHL players competing in the KHL (e.g., Jaromir Jagr, Ilya Kovalchuk, David Booth, Derek Roy, Cristobal Huet, and Linus Omark). Indeed, with 23 teams in the KHL, it is undoubtedly a bigger league than the EBEL, where 11 teams form the association's membership. Beyond size and competitive level, factors such as "import" rules and athlete payments differ between leagues. Import rules are essentially the number of players that a team can employ from outside of the domestic leagues' constituent countries. Further, rules around payments to players are certainly unstandardized; salary cap regulations are determined individually by each leagues' board. One consistency amongst the myriad professional hockey league around the globe, however, is that talented hockey players are the inputs employed to provide the entertainment spectacle. Here, given Canada's position as a global power in the sport (www.iihf.com), elite Canadian hockey players can realistically pursue their dreams of playing professionally.

In the area of professional hockey, the NHL has been the focal point of most scholarly research; given it is one of the "big four" sports in North America (Titlebaum & Lawrence, 2010), this is relatively unsurprising. Some of the research on the NHL includes topics such as the adjustment process of playing in the NHL (e.g., Battocchio et al., 2009; Battocchio et al., 2010); violence (Burdekin & Grindon Morton, 2015; Zakhem, 2015); the effects of concussions (Caron et al., 2013); shootout advantages (McEwan et al., 2012); and scouting criteria and assessment (Renger, 1994).

Beyond this context, however, there is a relative paucity, globally, of academic research on professional hockey, outside of the NHL. Those studies that do exist include marketing strategies for minor professional teams in North America (e.g., Paul et al., 2013; Smith, 1995), and migration patterns of Canadians playing professional hockey in Europe (e.g., Elliott & Maguire, 2008). Robidoux's (2001) book "Men at Play", which explores masculinity and work-related socialization of players in the AHL and chasing their NHL dream, is another of the limited studies focusing on professional hockey outside of the NHL ranks. This book, however, is important for the current investigation, given the AHL is one of the professional leagues where USPORTS players have advanced to compete professionally.

Canadian University Sport

Research conducted on collegiate athletics in Canada has focused on issues that include human resource management (Doherty & Danylchuk, 1996), gender (Allain, 2008), organizational effectiveness (Wolfe et al., 2002), Athletic Director competencies (Chard et al. In Press; Danylchuk & Chelladurai, 1999), ethical decision-making (Copeland & Potwarka, 2016), and student-athlete recruitment (Chard et al., 2013a; Chard & Potwarka, 2017). Here, the ability to attract talented student-athletes, and thereby contribute to the legitimacy of USPORTS hockey as a transition point within the athlete pathway, is central given the competing choices for athletic and scholastic development presented to elite hockey players. To be sure, varsity men's hockey, in Canada, differs from many post-secondary sports where the primary recruiting pool is graduating, teenage, high school athletes. USPORTS men's hockey coaches, in contrast, are more actively recruiting players in their early 20s from the CHL; thus, the risk of these athletes forgoing university is real.

Legitimacy

Legitimacy has been extensively examined in the field of management and sport management (e.g., Bitektine, 2011; Deephouse & Carter, 2005; Edwards & Washington, 2015; Golant & Sillince, 2007;

Leiter, 2005; Lock et al., 2015; Sam, 2011; Suchman, 1995). Being associated as a legitimate transition point within an athlete pathway plays an important role in attracting and maintaining the most talented inputs for organizations, in the current research, USPORT teams. Indeed, organizational legitimacy originates from the idea that there is acceptance of an organization's actions and/or managerial decisions (Edwards & Washington, 2015; Lehtonen, 2017; Lock et al., 2015; Phelps & Dickson, 2009; Sam, 2011) to meet consumers' goals. Bitektine and Haack (2015) stated,

[L]egitimacy can be viewed as an asset "owned" by a certain actor – an individual, organization, or category of organizations – it still remains a social evaluation made by others. Those actors that confer legitimacy (hereafter evaluators) can be individuals or collective actors – namely, groups, organizations, or field-level actors, such as the media or regulators. Evaluators make judgments about the social properties of an organization or a category and, through their actions, generate positive (or negative) social, political, and economic outcomes. (p.50)

This acceptance can be based on institutional norms within a particular environment (Suchman, 1995). Here, legitimacy can ultimately dictate the survival of an organization within an organizational field. Indeed, Tolbert (1985) indicates that societal views and expectations produce pressures that affect an organization. Bitektine (2011) suggests that legitimacy judgments, from constituents, are formed through specific organizational actions, which then inform evaluations of the organization. Thus, legitimacy is "an anchor-point of a vastly expanded theoretical apparatus addressing the normative and cognitive forces that constrain, construct, and empower organizational actors" (Suchman, 1995, p. 571). Material resources, legal standing, and cultural status are all sources of legitimacy (Leiter, 2005).

Building on the work of Suchman (1995), Lock et al. (2015), and Bitektine (2011), there are several types of legitimacy: consequential, procedural, structural, personal, managerial, technical, and linkage; Table 1 provides a description of each type of legitimacy. The types of legitimacy are discussed in the context of evaluation; specifically, this relates to how the actions of organizations ultimately shape the acceptance (or not) of that organization by constituents. For example, Edwards and Washington (2015) highlight the role of College Hockey Inc. to promote the NCAA Division I men's hockey system and connect with potential players as a means to compete with the CHL. Edwards and Washington (2015) highlighted the differences in recruiting concepts being presented to the most talented Canadian players, which included educational opportunities and opportunities to play at a professional level. The importance of the work by Edwards and Washington (2015) was that it highlighted concepts used to establish and maintain the legitimacy of the CHL and NCAA athlete pathways, as they pertained to Canadian athletes choosing their developmental path.

Table 1. The types of legitimacy (Lock et al., 2015)

Type of Legitimacy	Definition
Consequential	The consequences of the actions of an organization result in the benefits for the constituents, industry, and/or community that they serve.
Procedural	"Are an organization's processes and procedures appropriate in relation to social and cultural norms?" (Lock et al., 2015, p.364)
Personal	Personal legitimacy is "based on charisma of the organizations leaders" (Bitektine, 2011, p.157).
Structural	The reoccurring features of different organizational processes and structures that align with the social and cultural norms.
Linkage	The links that an organization is being associated with or has a partnership.
Managerial	Based on performance, is the organization operating efficiently and effectively in "relation to the normative expectations" (Lock et al., 2015, p.364).
Technical	Bitektine (2011) explained that, "Technical legitimacy is focused on such features as the core technology, quality of services, and qualifications of actors, whereas managerial legitimacy emphasizes features related to efficiency in management and operations" (p.156).

While most of the literature on legitimacy is discussed within the context of acceptance of an organization or, in some cases, an individual, there is limited research that has discussed sports organizations as catalysts in an athlete pathway, within this context of legitimacy. The current investigation starts to fill that gap, as the focus of the research is whether USPORTS, based on historical data, should be considered a pathway choice for those looking to develop and play professional hockey. Through this research, we look to illustrate how multiple pathway options can form that are legitimate but are dependent upon the messaging and perceptions of those pathways to influence the decision-making processes of elite hockey players. This fills a gap in the literature, as it can illustrate the versatility of using the concepts of organizational legitimacy within a sport system context.

Expectancy Value Theory

Expectancy value theories suggest that human behaviours result from expectations that are largely goal oriented (Ajzen & Madden, 1986). Expectancy value theory can be used as a conceptual framework of motivation, whereby an individual's behaviour results from decision-making with the goal of maximizing positive outcomes and minimizing negative consequences (Chen et al., 2006; Steers et al., 2004; Tolman, 1959; Vroom, 1964). Expectancy value theory has been used within the context of workplace motivation (e.g., Chen et al., 2006; Issac et al., 2001; Lawler, 1971; Mathieu et al., 1992; Summers & Hendrix, 1991), marketing (Zeithaml, 1988), education (Anitsal & Cadotte, 2007), and gender differences (Eccles & Harold, 1991). More recently, expectancy value theory has also been applied in sport management contexts (e.g., Chard & Potwarka, 2017; Edwards et al., 2019).

Vroom (1964) identified three components of an individual's motivation: valence, instrumentality, and expectancy. Valence is understood as the affective or emotional beliefs that an individual has with an outcome (Van Eerde & Theirry, 1996; Vroom, 1964). Here, it is suggested that valence is a function of an individual's goals, needs, and value, which becomes an overall source of motivation (Vroom, 1964). Instrumentality is an individual's belief that achievement on an initial outcome will lead to a secondary or subsequent outcome. The final component is expectancy, whereby "the strength of a person's belief about whether a particular outcome is possible" (Ramlall, 2004, p. 56) takes precedence. Kaur (2013) notes that achievement motivation is "the tendency to strive for success or to attain a desirable goal" (p.409). Indeed, expectancy value theory proposes that people work towards goals because they have an underlying need to achieve; here, individuals make choices and are motivated if they believe their efforts will lead to positive outcomes (expectancy). In the current context, existing perceptions about the possible outcomes, or expectancies, from playing in USPORTS may influence prospective players to eschew the league; here, if they perceive their chances to play professionally after USPORTS are remote, why pursue this developmental path?

Method

To answer the research questions, we have drawn on a quantitative data collection process. Data were collected using internet sources; specifically, hockeydb.com and eliteprospects.com were employed. First, men's university hockey rosters, from 2000-2018 were captured; here, accessing information on specific leagues in USPORTS proved most efficient. For example, clicking on the AUS section of hockeydb.com and going to each school's hyperlink, (i.e., Saint Mary's University), was the initial step in the process. Next, the researchers systematically clicked on each player's name and reviewed their individual playing histories. Here, if a player had played professionally after playing in USPORTS, their name, university from which they graduated, professional league(s), years, and number of games played professionally were recorded. Concurrently, the same process occurred in eliteprospects.com to, again, ascertain any USPORTS players' career playing histories. When the two lists were complete, they were merged and all discrepancies in player details (i.e., games played) were identified and rectified. Lastly, duplicate names were removed leaving one comprehensive database in Microsoft Excel.

The data analysis consisted of using descriptive statistics; here, Trochim (2001) indicated, "Descriptive statistics present quantitative descriptions in a manageable form. . . Descriptive statistics help you summarize large amounts of data in a sensible way" (p. 268). Trochim (2001) explained that the distribution of data is the "summary of the frequency of individual values or ranges of values for a variable" (p. 269), while the frequency distribution is a common means of presenting the distribution data. Frequency is based on categorizing data values by depicting the results through tables and graphs. The data presented within the graphs and tables in the findings illustrate the percentages, averages, means, maximum and minimum results, and the raw numbers. The final stage of the analysis and interpretation was accomplished using Tableau software's visualization and analysis tools.

Findings

Empirical data from 2000-2018 show that perceptions surrounding the USPORTS men's hockey league – as a league where professional aspirations are unrealized – are both accurate and erroneous, depending upon perspective. Results show that a limited number of players ($n = 8$) advanced from the Canadian university system, during this time, to play at the highest level of professional hockey: the NHL. Total NHL games played were 1,537, largely influenced

by three players: Joel Ward (809), Derek Ryan (302), and Mathieu Darche (268). A more compelling number of USPORTS graduates (183) have skated in the NHL's principal affiliate association: the American Hockey League (see Table 2), playing 8254 total games.

Table 2. Number of USPORTS players playing in the NHL and AHL by Conference

	AUS	Canada West	OUA	Grand Total
SUM GP NHL	897	351	289	1537
# of Players NHL	3	3	2	8
SUM GP AHL	3364	2698	2192	8254
# of Players AHL	83	55	45	183
SUM GP NHL & AHL	4261	3049	2481	9791
SUM Players in NHL & AHL	86	58	47	191

Beyond these two preeminent professional leagues in North America, the data clearly shows numerous players advance from myriad USPORTS teams to progress to professional clubs in leagues throughout the world. Overall, from 2000-2018, 1,391 players played at least ten games in professional leagues after playing USPORTS. Table 3 shows a detailed breakdown of players' progression from USPORTS to professional ranks, year-over-year, and by conference. In addition, Figure 1 shows the rolling four-year average, and upward trajectory, of USPORTS players playing professionally.

Table 3. Players playing professionally by conference and year

Players Going Pro by Year & Conference

U Sports End1	USPort League1			Grand Total
	AUS	Canada West	OUA	
2000	23	20	22	65
2001	24	16	24	64
2002	21	12	13	46
2003	32	15	32	79
2004	26	23	24	73
2005	27	27	27	81
2006	15	21	30	66
2007	26	20	27	73
2008	33	25	39	97
2009	23	6	34	63
2010	9	21	37	67
2011	15	18	37	70
2012	19	10	43	72
2013	17	14	48	79
2014	20	21	36	77
2015	12	19	40	71
2016	25	18	34	77
2017	17	18	53	88
2018	19	22	42	83
Grand Total	403	346	642	1,391

Figure 1. Rolling Four-Year Average of USPORTS players playing professional hockey

Table 4. Summary of data for USPORTS athletes turning pro from 2000-201

[illegible]

In total, 403 players from the AUS, 346 from CW, and 642 from OUA moved on to play professionally. The University of New Brunswick was the most prolific school at producing professional players (66); the University of Alberta (63), St. Francis Xavier (62), University of Calgary, and the University of Prince Edward Island (both 58) complete the top-five developmental school programs. Table 4 shows each of the USPORTS schools' results for producing professional players, number of games played, average games played, and average number of players turning pro annually.

Overall, former USPORTS players have pursued professional playing opportunities in over 35 countries (see Figure 2). The United States was by far the most popular country for players to embark on professional careers; specifically, 1,790 occurrences were found of a former USPORTS player playing in American professional leagues. The East Coast Hockey League (665), Central Hockey League (387), and Southern Professional Hockey League (234) were the most frequent organizations to see USPORTS alumni participate. France (273), Germany (268), and the United Kingdom (175) were the next most frequent destinations.

Figure 2. Breakdown of countries (and number of occurrences) where USPORTS players have played professionally

Sheet 1

Discussion

The purpose of the current investigation was to empirically evaluate the career progression of USPORTS men's varsity hockey players to understand if USPORTS men's hockey is a legitimate pathway to a professional playing career. While "numerous researchers have examined the salient factors in the college selection process ... they have not necessarily come to a consensus on the most important factors in the decision-making process" (Popp et al., 2011, p. 178); opportunity to advance athletic careers, however, is often a consideration (i.e., Pauline, 2010; Popp et al., 2011). While recruitment was not the focus of this research, the findings can be understood within this context, as transitioning from USPORTS to professional levels of competition can be used as a recruitment tool that exemplifies the legitimacy of this athlete pathway. As highlighted by expectancy value theory research,

expectations are an essential aspect of an individual's motivations and, ultimately, their decision-making process (Ramlall, 2004). Thus, if talented athletes, who have a desire to further their hockey ambitions, are unable to visualize USPORTS as a legitimate pathway to professional hockey, they will invariably look elsewhere.

The type of legitimacy within this context can best be understood as *linkage legitimacy*. Here, the legitimacy of the athlete pathway, for a player, is contingent upon seeing a connection between an organization and the desired outcome of playing professionally. Or, said differently, an association, linking a pathway and a consequence or result, such as playing professionally, must be evident when one considers an organization or program to meet their developmental expectations. Thus, the findings here indicate that choosing the Canadian university men's hockey pathway should be viewed positively as a link to professional levels of competition. To date, USPORTS men's hockey is described as a "hidden gem" or "best kept secret" in the hockey landscape in North America (Braes & Edwards, 2021; Yue, 2016); the numbers in the current investigation support this notion and, arguably, legitimize the pathway.

Here, the data were unambiguous in terms of development to play professionally *at the highest level*. To be sure, USPORTS as a catalyst to play in the NHL is largely unjustifiable at present. While it *can* happen, the frequency and success—in terms of number of players progressing and games played by USPORTS alumni at the NHL level—is nominal. This fact, perhaps more than any other, likely contributes to the perception of USPORTS as a place where professional dreams go unfulfilled and visions of professional careers are extinguished. Thus, if the NHL is the barometer for measuring the legitimacy of USPORTS as a developmental ground for professional careers, the league is clearly deficient; however, if the net for acceptable career progression is expanded beyond the world's greatest league, USPORTS should certainly be considered legitimate and is clearly not the end of the hockey road for many players.

Given that brands exist in consumers' minds (Batey, 2008), the need to (re)educate USPORTS stakeholders and (re)position the organization is surely needed. Indeed, as Manley et al. (2010) maintain, expectations of an organization are determined through "the processes of utilizing observable cues, past experience and knowledge, in order to predict specific outcomes" (p. 517). Thus, it should be the responsibility of USPORT management, and specific team stakeholders, to promote the reputation of the league, holistically, and individual university programs, at a more granular level.

Indeed, this undesirable cycle may be a constraining factor to attract talented hockey players when they are making decisions on where their future development, as an athlete and individual, should take place. Considering that athletes are instrumental in shaping perceptions of a school's brand, specifically, and a conference's brand more generally, the linkage to professional hockey opportunities enables the perception that USPORTS is a viable option, as it was explained by Braes and Edwards (2021). Therefore, in order to succeed in the intense competition for athletes' services between CHL and NCAA, it is essential for sport managers across the Canadian intercollegiate sport system to understand the perceptions and imagery associated with the league and university teams, and to combat those associations that are not grounded in verity.

As some hockey scholars have outlined (i.e., Edwards & Washington, 2015), the current perception of the Canadian hockey system is that the NCAA or CHL are the only viable paths for an athlete to play professional hockey. Notwithstanding the previous discussion on NHL developmental insufficiencies, the data clearly shows that USPORTS has a strong history of facilitating progression, for its players, to other professional ranks. However,

it remains common for capable players, and students, to bypass USPORTS, and thus an education, in favour of moving directly to second-tier professional leagues once their junior hockey eligibility has expired (i.e., 20 years-old).

In our estimation, USPORTS men's hockey stakeholders must begin controlling the messaging and communicating the desired associations regarding the sport to its target audiences (Sethi, 1987; Wear et al., 2018). In the current investigation, the focal target audience is player-consumers (Chard, 2013); however, other consumers of the sport – including spectators, sponsors, coaches – could similarly be impacted by a stronger USPORTS brand positioning achieved through enhanced communications and messaging. Indeed, these tactics should improve USPORTS' reputation within the hockey community, as they will control the misinformation about the league and improve the perceived viability of the organization to potential stakeholders (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Fischer & Reuber, 2007; Sethi, 2018; Washington & Edwards, 2016), including those players considering future developmental paths. Specifically, the positioning of USPORTS men's hockey needs a paradigm shift; messaging to promote a modification on what a "traditional" professional hockey developmental path should look like is necessary. Indeed, the mandate of USPORTS should be to use the information presented here to recalibrate the mindset of myriad consumer groups including player-consumers, spectators, and sponsors, amongst others. In the context of the current study, altering player-consumers' mindsets and educating those considering their future, to understand that USPORTS is a viable step along the journey to European and/or second-tier professional pursuits, is needed.

For hockey players approaching the end of their junior eligibility, USPORTS men's hockey *should* be front-of-mind when considering the next steps in their athletic career. For players with a goal to play professionally, Canadian university hockey offers a high calibre of play with quality coaching (Chard, 2013; Chard et al., 2013b) that players can translate into a professional career. As the data presented here indicates, choosing to further develop as a player, by playing Canadian university hockey, does not hinder professional opportunities. In fact, the rolling-average trend shows more players turning professional, after playing in USPORTS, than ever before. Therefore, it can be assumed that USPORTS hockey players are likely to receive professional hockey opportunities similar to, or better than, those that they receive at the end of their junior hockey eligibility, with the auxiliary benefit of receiving a degree while enhancing their on-ice skills. Notably, several USPORTS hockey players have developed significantly enough to receive playing opportunities in more renowned professional leagues (i.e., AHL). It is important to note, the data reflects USPORTS alumni who have *chosen* to pursue professional hockey offers; undoubtably, there are some athletes who were "good enough" to play professionally, but opted to pursue other opportunities (i.e., law school, MBA program, job opportunity).

Clearly, playing Canadian university hockey provides players a legitimate opportunity to achieve both their hockey and personal goals; yet the USPORTS hockey brand continues to be misconstrued. The longstanding erroneous associations that have plagued the perception of USPORTS in the hockey community are a sign that stakeholders are struggling to instil the trust in potential hockey recruits that the USPORTS hockey experience will meet their expectations. Indeed, within the hockey community, USPORTS' reputation has been hampered by the obstacles outlined by Chard and colleagues (2013b); however, to continue to allow the reputation of a quality product to be hindered by inaction is ineffective management. To be sure, allowing erroneous assumptions about the league's (in)effectiveness to develop professional careers is poor stewardship. To this point, USPORTS has

struggled to activate alumni, who have progressed to play professional hockey, as ambassadors. Prior to this study, no known database of USPORTS men's hockey players who progressed to professional hockey has been created and made accessible to potential recruits. Hiding or ignoring this information limits the expectations of recruits when considering USPORTS as a legitimate pathway for hockey development. If talented athletes are unable to visualize USPORTS as a legitimate pathway to professional hockey, they will continue to look elsewhere.

Indeed, the battle for athletes' services amongst development and second-tier professional leagues in the hockey community is akin to the intense recruiting battles experienced in other intercollegiate sports. Therefore, it is the responsibility of USPORTS stakeholders to forcefully change how their league is perceived in the hockey community. Specifically, this research team calls upon stakeholders of USPORTS men's hockey to actively invoke messaging that restores a sense of trust and viability in USPORTS, within the hockey community. A simple preliminary solution would be to establish a publicly available database of USPORTS alumni who have played professional hockey.

A model that USPORTS could look to follow is the CHL's *Champions Awareness* campaign. The *Champions Awareness* campaign profiles CHL alumni who used their experience in the league to launch either professional hockey careers or to pursue other occupations (i.e., police officer, pilot; Canadian Hockey League [CHL], 2016). The *Champions Awareness* campaign continues today, as it is prominently featured in CHL marketing material (i.e., website) as well as during game broadcasts throughout the season (CHL, 2016). Instilling a similar campaign for USPORTS hockey alumni would help ensure that potential recruits know that Canadian university hockey is not the end of their career. In fact, choosing to play Canadian university hockey could be the beginning of a prominent professional career, both on and off the ice.

Conclusion, Future Studies, Limitations, and Delimitations

This research addresses a significant challenge for USPORTS men's hockey administrators: the *perception* that the league is a dead-end where professional aspirations are muted. For consumers to be able to make an effective decision, they need "sufficiently accurate and detailed information" (Wilson, 2011, p. 155) and less distracting information that invariably influences their decision-making (Li et al., 2018). This study contributes to this end. Empirically, it demonstrates that opportunities to progress to professional hockey certainly exist; now, USPORTS stakeholders simply need to know this is the case. To reiterate, the purpose of the current investigation was to empirically evaluate the career progression of USPORTS men's varsity hockey players to understand if the USPORTS men's hockey league is a legitimate pathway to a professional playing career.

This research challenges the notion that USPORTS is not a legitimate pathway for male hockey players to play professional hockey. We ascribe to the notion that this pathway is a more of a 'hidden gem' rather than a 'developmental wasteland'. Here, as players' expectations are met, and they move on from USPORTS to play professional hockey throughout the world, the reputation of the league as a legitimate athlete pathway, should only grow.

Future research could be conducted considering the legitimacy of the various leagues where USPORTS' alumni progress to play. Here, developing a 'strength index' to account for the quality of play in these global professional leagues, and/or the remuneration available within the various leagues, would be of interest. Further, understanding the motivations of these athletes to pursue professional hockey careers, after graduating from

USPORTS, would be instructive. Indeed, understanding the relative priorities players place on monetary, social, and environmental factors would be a quality investigation contributing to the scarcity of research in this area. Finally, understanding USPORTS Women's hockey, and the path to professional ranks and/or National teams, is worthy of further analysis.

In closing, we recognize that our study is not without certain limitations and delimitations. Here, no existing database, that tracks or contains information on USPORTS hockey graduates' professional hockey pathways, is available. Our database thus was created manually from two existing sources (hockeydb.com and eliteprospects.com); therefore, we were reliant on the accuracy of these sources. In terms of delimitations, this study was specifically focused on players' progression to professional ranks from USPORTS. We did not attempt to assess the quality of the professional leagues and/or endeavour to ascertain players' compensation from their years playing professionally. As noted above, these would be worthy explorations for future studies.

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