

SHOULD WE PAY COACHES IN AMATEUR SPORTS FOR THEIR TIME AND KNOWLEDGE?

# CASH FOR OUR COACHES

BY JOHN CUDMORE  
Staff Writer

**C**oach for hire. It may be the way of the future in amateur sports as competition to produce winning teams and elite athletes becomes increasingly intense.

But is it feasible to "pay" volunteer coaches and make them responsible for producing wins and quality athletes? Or should the opportunity to coach kids' sports be considered a privilege?

Elite programs in the U.S., including minor hockey, offer handsome compensation. Some local sources say they know of coaches receiving up to \$45,000 for a single season to oversee top teams.

Referees and umpires are paid officials. And there is a growing trend to hire office administrators. Why not coaches?

"I know some organizations that pay and some would like to think they're getting better coaching, but I don't feel we're that hard up yet that we'd have to pay coaches," said Ontario Minor Hockey Association executive director Graham Brown.

"I don't think it's a bad thing to put in a job description or bad to pay for a service, but only based on the needs of an association."

Referees get paid and I think that's good, but coaching has always been unpaid.

The notion coaches be reimbursed for offering their time and knowledge stems from the Open Ice hockey summit held in Toronto in 1999.

One of the recommendations from the summit included a coaching mentor system, where a master or head coach would oversee all the coaches in a minor hockey program.

Some question the idea that compensation will improve coaching. The prospect of a stipend could threaten coaching style, says one veteran Newmarket Minor Hockey Association coach.

"I choose to coach voluntarily because I enjoy it," said Dan Levick, a novice rep team coach.

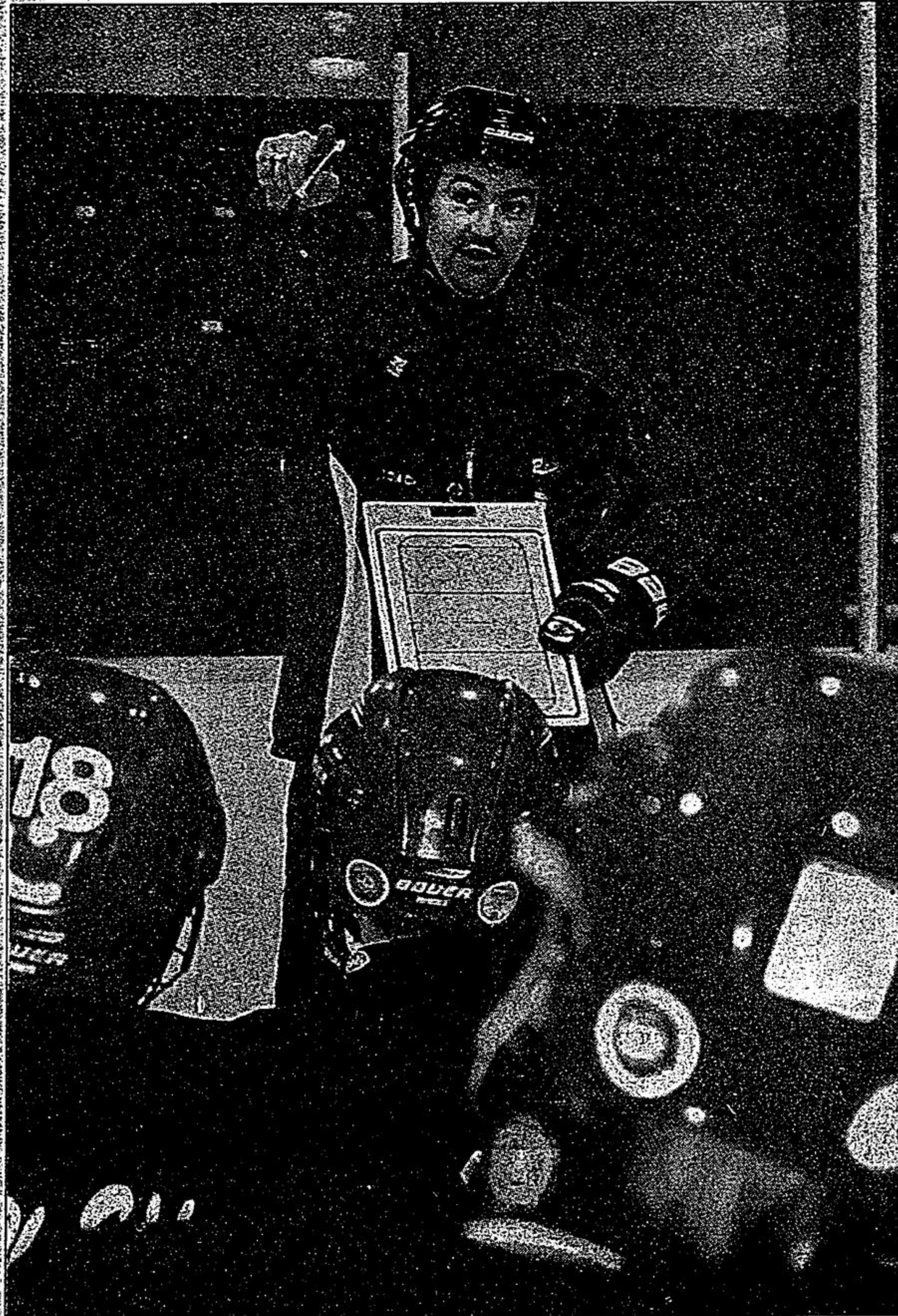
"I think to pay coaches would alter the philosophy and shift the focus too much to winning at the expense of developing player skills."

Aurora Minor Hockey Association president David Saunders echoes that sentiment.

The worry would be that they're shopping themselves all the time," said Saunders, who views the Aurora organization's hiring of a head coach this season to oversee all coaches within the system as an opportunity to improve the program.

"We worked it into the cost of the operation. We view him as a resource."

The upside of compensating coaches is that it may attract a higher calibre of coach and, in turn, higher-calibre players and results. In minor hockey, that only affects



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Veteran Newmarket minor hockey coach Dan Levick says paying coaches would put the focus too much on winning and not enough on player development.

teams at levels where there is competition for players and where player movement is fairly liberal, such as the Greater-Toronto Hockey League or at the triple-A level across the province.

"I can see it happening in the (GTHL) because they can attract players from all over, but here you can't," said Saunders.

"The days when little Billy's dad coached the team because nobody else was interested are disappearing."

Coaching is becoming increasingly demanding and sophisticated, with national coaching certifications to be achieved. Often the courses cost hundreds of dollars and are

paid for out of the coach's own pocket, although some organizations reimburse part or all of the cost.

Although opposed to paying coaches, Levick, a father of three hockey-playing sons, says it would be acceptable to offer compensation to coaches willing to improve their skills.

"As a parent, I'd rather see money spent educating coaches," he said.

"I'd be fully supportive of reimbursement for expertise... bringing respected coaches in to conduct clinics or information sessions."

The AMHA, for example, covers half the cost of attending coaching clinics.

The Aurora Youth Soccer Club introduced honorariums for rep team coaches two years ago by allotting funds to each team, says president Joe Borges. The club was commended by the Ontario Soccer Association for its efforts.

"There were a couple of reasons," said Borges, adding several organizations have since followed suit.

"It helps encourage coaches to follow a club policy and to offset travel costs and that sort of thing for coaches. We have a lot of (would-be) coaches in Toronto and if we can cover their gas costs, it encourages them to come here."

Borges also noted the club reimburses coaches for attending clinics.

"We encourage as many coaches as possible to get levels and we pay because we think it's for the benefit of the coach and the kids."

*"I know some organizations that pay and some would like to think they're getting better coaching, but I don't feel we're that hard up yet that we'd have to pay coaches."*

It is a matter of economics for minor amateur sports organizations. In hockey, especially, costs are high and some observers worry payment to coaches would drive registration fees out of reach for families.

In that case, top players could even abandon hockey because their families can no longer afford to participate.

Let's say all coaches received \$5,000 for the season. In the Vaughan program, multiply that by 172 teams for a total of \$860,000. Where would the money come from? You guessed it, the pockets of the parents.

If that example seems extreme, narrow it down to a coach for one rep team, then divide \$5,000 per team among 17 sets of parents, the standard number of players on a team roster. It's still an additional \$300 per player for the season.

It's a trend some fear has already started.

The fact is, already the best athletes in Canada are no longer hockey players. They're playing lacrosse, football, baseball, soccer," suggested Jim Parcels, a former Ontario Minor Hockey Association administrative co-ordinator and now the full-time director of hockey operations for the City of Vaughan.

"It's ironic that it all started about 10 years ago with the creation of triple-A zones, which took hockey to another level cost-wise."

"We'd probably lose 80 per cent of our registration," said Parcels. "Hockey is expensive enough as it is."

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