

LIMIT NUMBER OF MONTHS PLAYERS SPEND ON ICE, COACHES SAY

Summer hockey too much for youngsters?

BY MIKE HAYAKAWA
Staff Writer

To play hockey during the spring and summer months or not to play?

It's a question that has sparked concern and controversy, particularly in the case of youngsters who play at the rep level.

Such leagues and tournaments during the so-called off-season were once rare.

These days though, they are in full view.

And there doesn't appear to be any sign they're going away soon, said Paul Titanic, a Markham resident who coached the Markham Waxers bantams and Brother Andre Catholic High School Cardinals senior boys teams last season.

"Look at the newspapers these days and they're full of advertisements for summer hockey for kids," he said.

Some hockey coaches, including Graham Wise, suggest parents limit how much competitive action youngsters face in a calendar year.

The 53-year-old Stouffville resident, who has been head coach of the York University Lions men's team since 1987, thinks the traditional rep winter season is long enough.

Maybe even be a little too long.

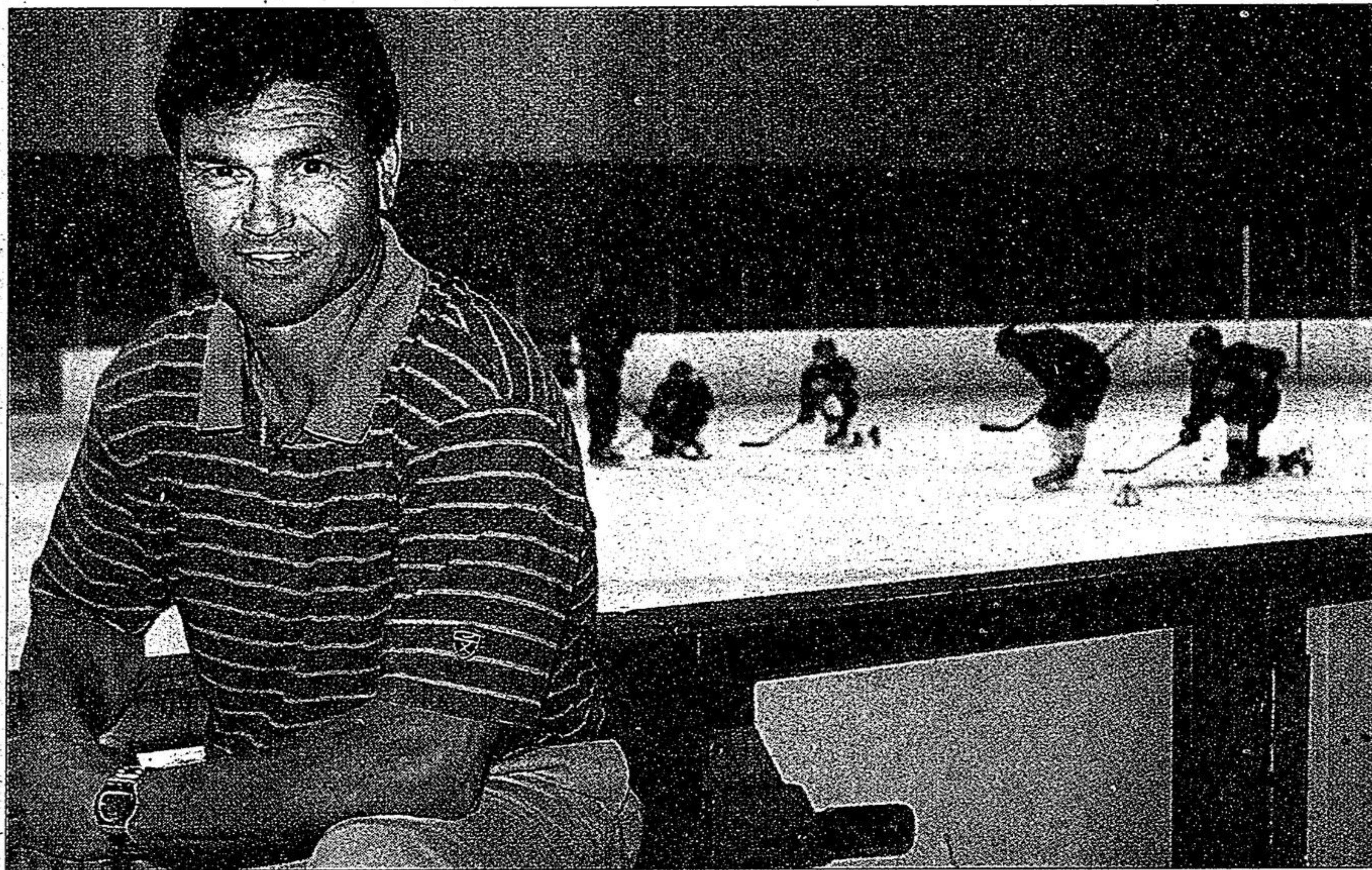
'So many parents are banking on their kids making it (to the pros). They're forgetting it's about enjoying it now in being an athlete.'

He thinks young players should only be on the ice from Labour Day through early spring.

Between seasons, he says youngsters should turn their attention to other recreational activities.

"These days, the kids are pushed enough from the third week of August until the end of March. Then you get the pressure of tryouts for the following season in April," Mr. Wise said of what players typically go through in a season.

He had first-hand experi-



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Stouffville's Graham Wise, a hockey coach at York University, suggests parents limit how much competitive action youngsters play in a calendar year. He coached a team of youngsters during this off-season.

ence this year when he coached a group of soon-to-be bantams on a spring tournament team.

Although Wise did it as a favour for his son, who played on the team, he vowed it would be the last time.

Intending to field a team of players entirely from Stouffville, a shortage of bodies forced him to seek prospects from Markham and Richmond Hill.

"During the first week of practice, I had four kids drop out. That was disappointing," he said.

Compounding the issue were practices, including one attended by just "four forwards and three defencemen".

During the late spring, players are often involved in school activities, including trips. In some instances, he detected some players were illegally practising with AAA rep teams for the following season.

"That shouldn't be happening," he noted of minor hockey rules that bar off-season practices.

Also catching Mr. Wise off guard were some tournament teams that stacked their rosters with the best AAA-calibre players from an entire region. This made disparity.

"It goes against all of my principles," he said of the competitive spring and summer leagues.

Mr. Wise and others are critical of those who run summer schools and leagues just to make a quick buck.

"There's so many people these days running private instruction or summer camps. It's a big business. It's everywhere. These guys are making a fortune," Mr. Titanic said.

Some parents are also to blame, both coaches say.

"The parents want more, more and more. People are focused on their kids and their development. They try to make their kids the best they can be," said Mr. Titanic, a former coach of the University of Toronto Varsity Blues men's team.

"So many parents are banking on their kids making it (to the pros). They're forget-

ting it's about enjoying it now in being an athlete."

Mr. Wise has seen many burned-out youngsters drop out of the game because they were playing year-round.

"It's definitely not right," he said. "What you want is a kid who is waiting anxiously at the front door saying to their mom and dad, 'Let's go to the rink!' not a kid who might be playing video games and have mom and dad say to the kid 'let's go to the rink.'"

Those 10 years of age or younger should take a sabbatical during the summer, Mr. Titanic believes.

MAKE IT A JOB?

"They need a significant break from the game — at least six weeks to a couple of months. You don't want to make it a job for the kid," he said.

Mr. Wise doesn't have qualms with youngsters who play unregulated pickup hockey during the summer months, such as the popular three-on-three or four-on-four versions played at mini rinks in the region — provided there's no parental involve-

ment.

"I've got no problems with that. You can't deny what someone likes. But sometimes I think it's what the parents like."

Coaching players on his Waxers' bantam team who will be eligible for the next Ontario Hockey League priority selection, Mr. Titanic has no objections to them playing in summer competitive leagues to keep an edge.

Yet there are some individuals who think competitive leagues and tournaments serve a purpose.

Jim Wells, general manager of the National Training Rink in Newmarket and coach of the Newmarket Hurricanes of the Provincial Junior A Hockey League, was quick to point out other sports such as basketball, baseball and even gymnastics place an emphasis on year-round competition, so why not hockey?

"Look at any other sport. Nobody takes off six months of the year. Baseball in the U.S. is done year-round. The players in the major leagues

play in North America during the summer and go to Puerto Rico to play winter ball. Basketball in the U.S. is year-round. That's what hockey is turning into," he said.

Mr. Wells also believes it's not harmful for youngsters to be on the ice at least once a week during the off-season as a means to remain fit and enhance skills.

"Kids might get mentally burned out, but they don't physically. It's fantastic for them (to be on the ice during the summer). It keeps their skills up and it's great recreation," he said.

Players who take to the ice in summer say it's good fun.

"I get more ice time and I get a chance to carry the puck more and it kind of helps my skating," said Teague Thackaway, a 10-year-old Newmarket resident who plays in a three-on-three house league team at the NTR in Newmarket.

When he isn't playing summer hockey, he's taking part in other recreational pursuits including golf and skateboarding.

And playing in a cool, indoor facility sure beats the August heat, he says.

Markham's Steve Stamkos played a variety of sports during the summer including lacrosse with the Markham Thunder and rep baseball with the Markham Mariners.

'Look at any other sport. Nobody takes off six months of the year. Baseball in the U.S. is done year-round.'

But the 14-year-old forward, a member of Paul Titanic's Waxers bantams last season, is focusing on hockey this summer with a tournament team of high calibre players. He's expected to be a high pick in next year's OHL draft.

Steve has been limiting his ice time to once a week and says diversity is good.

"It's good to play other sports and take a rest from hockey," he said.

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