The social support experiences of major junior ice hockey players in a physically removed region of Canada

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Abstract

The present report from a larger project overviews the sources and types of social support resourced by 10 major junior athletes while they performed out of one physically removed Canadian region. Retrospective interviews and content analysis were conducted during three stages (3, 3, and 4 respondents). The data were segmented into meaning units, coded into a hierarchy of themes, and verified by each respondent and an expert panel (former athlete, coach, parent of former athlete). The respondents sought out three types of social support from four different sources (providers) that were adapted to their remote location, including teachers and general community support. Implications are considered in terms of applied research and practice with aspiring adolescent athletes located in removed locations.

Key words: Regional, social support, ice hockey.

Introduction

Many elite junior ice hockey players aspire to the professional ranks, with the pinnacle being the National Hockey League (NHL). There are approximately 10 elite junior (termed major junior) ice hockey leagues that NHL teams draft from. Among these, the Canadian Hockey League (CHL) provided 33 and 28 of the first 60 athletes drafted to the NHL in 2005 and 2006, respectively. The CHL consists of three regional junior elite leagues: the Western Hockey League, Ontario Hockey League, and Quebec Major Junior Hockey League. Housed within these three leagues (total) there are 50 teams based in 10 Canadian provinces with another nine teams extending beyond Canada's borders into the United States. The CHL is considered an elite junior ice hockey league largely due to its high number of athletes drafted to the NHL, and also because athletes from this level are selected to represent their country at the World Junior Ice Hockey Championships.

Relevant to this report, CHL players vary in age from 15 to 21 years (CHL Fast Facts, 2006), indicating that they are also progressing through adolescence while developing their talent as elite athletes. Bloom (1985) acknowledged that while adolescent athletes transition through stages of talent development, the types of social support they experience modifies. For instance, Bloom found that the style of coaching provided for pre-elite junior swimmers and tennis players (these were the only two sports considered) reflected more emotional support, whereas among elite performers from the same sports, the coaches focused primarily on technical assistance. Adding context to this process, Bruner (2002) noted that there

were unique pressures associated with being elite junior athletes in general and major junior ice hockey players in particular (i.e., balancing educational demands, adjustment to higher performance standards, relocation away from family). Further, as Bruner noted, there are resources that assist these athletes with transitional adaptation to the elite level (i.e. coaches, peers, billeting families).

Among Canadian major junior athletes, there is sometimes one additional contextual pressure that factors upon social support provision beyond age and high standard of sport performance: being located in a physically removed region. Lending credence to this burgeoning consideration, Gauthier et al. (2006) found that among elite coaches, there were contextual / geographic challenges associated with performing out of a physically removed region. For instance, the challenges included extensive travel to tournaments, poor training facilities, and limited access to sport science expertise. Counter balancing these limitations, the coaches indicated that there is a network of community resources to assist with athlete retention. The intent herein, from a larger graduate project where athlete social support was considered in relation to one sport (ice hockey), is to delineate the aspects of social support provision that are adapted to the one removed region, this time from the vantage of athletes' perspectives. To do this within Northern Ontario, Canada, we chose ice hockey, primarily because it provided the highest level of sport participants available in the region. Furthermore, major junior ice hockey players, reflecting the aforementioned details of the CHL, often pursue junior sport careers in remote regions of Canada (CHL Fast Facts, 2006).

Social Support

In elite ice hockey there have been recent indications that social support resources play an important role in athlete retention and success (Botterill, 2004; Bruner, 2002; Halliwell, 2004). Generally, social support refers to "knowing that one is loved and cared for and that others will do all they can when a problem arises" (Sarason et al., 1990, p.119). Sarason and colleagues concluded that the essence of social support lies in the individuals' beliefs that they have valued providers who display concern, and are willing to assist in times of need. Albrecht and Adelman (1984) have also contributed to this definition. They proposed that a support network "serves to meet a recipient's needs for venting feelings, reassurance, and improved communication skills; to reduce uncertainty during times of stress, provides resources and companionship, and aids in mental and physical recovery" (pp. 8-9). Within elite

sport, there is well-documented evidence that as training and competition challenges increase, effective social support resources assist with athlete adaptation (Tenenbaum et al., 2003), especially when those challenges pertain to where the athlete is located (Schinke et al., 2007 in press).

Pines et al. (1981) suggested six types of social support offered by providers: (a) listening, (b) emotional, (c) emotional challenge, (d) shared social reality, (e) technical appreciation, and (f) technical challenge. Pertaining to elite sport, all but technical appreciation and technical challenge can be allotted by individuals concerned with the athlete, regardless of sport expertise. Rosenfeld and Richman (1997) proposed two additional support types: (g) tangible assistance (e.g., providing financial assistance), and (h) personal assistance (e.g., driving the athlete somewhere). Integrated, this comprehensive list illustrates a broad scope of potential assistance types, housed within the larger multidimensional construct. As Rees and Hardy (2004) noted, when such behaviours are paired with effective providers, they contribute to a buffering effect for elite athletes that help manage personal and contextual stress. In relation to the present report, these buffering resources are considered retrospectively by athletes from a time when they were elite performers *and* adolescents located in a physically removed region.

Support types and stages of athletic performance / development: Bloom (1985) characterized an athlete's talent development in terms of three chronological stages: the (a) early years, (b) middle years and (c) later years. Within each stage, considering only parents and coaches, Bloom noted that these two sources provided fundamental types of assistance. The early years reflected a time of excitement where athletes became involved (but not necessarily engaged) in the sport, and parents and coaches provided emotional support. It was found that extensive emotional support early on culminated in the performers becoming "hooked" on their sport disciplines. During the middle years, athletes were committed to in their chosen area, and hard work and persistence were pivotal to their progression. Therein, parents provided financial / tangible and emotional support, and coaches balanced emotional support with technical support. A high level of commitment to practice and the will to succeed typified the athletes during their later (elite) years. During this final stage where talent became fully developed, many athletes relocated to other cities and towns to benefit from a specialized coach and other elite peer athletes.

Durand-Bush and Salmela (2002) extended Bloom's (1985) research by identifying four more precise stages of athletic development in place of the original three: the (a) sampling years, (b) specializing years, (c) investment years, and (d) maintenance years. The first two stages of both models mapped as the same. However, Bloom's final stage was divided into stages three and four from Durand-Bush and Salmela where athlete development during their elite tenure was considered more closely. The investment years were characterized by sacrifice (e.g., a willingness to move / travel great distances), hard work, intensive training, and also, specialized coaches. The maintenance years were typified by the

athletes' established presence as elite performers, and also, by a broad range of integrated sport science resources supporting their retention. New within the authors' defined elite stages (mostly the last stage) was support from new providers including weight trainers, nutritionists, and sport psychologists, each with assistance that was markedly similar to either technical appreciation, technical challenge, or both. In relation to Durand-Bush and Salmela's stages, major junior ice hockey players' experiences can be grouped into either investment or maintenance years, depending on whether they are recently promoted to the major junior level, or retained (Schinke et al., 2007 in press).

Social support networks for major junior athletes: When considering the resources required by rookie major junior hockey players, the same sport and level targeted within the present study, the providers and types of support delineated by Bloom (1985) and Durand-Bush and Salmela (2002) closely resembled those recently found by Bruner (2002). Precisely, major junior hockey parents were identified as providers of listening, emotional (emotional / challenge) and tangible support, and coaches allotted technical support (appreciation / challenge). In addition to these more common providers, Bruner noted that scouts, schools and host families (though only for those who were relocating in terms of host families) also assisted the elite adolescents with contextual challenges inherent to their new performance level, given their age. It was found that scouts provided tactical suggestions in relation to sport and life, schools (high schools or universities) assisted with scheduling flexibility, and host families provided emotional support and personal assistance, often in place of parents. In contrast to other research from outside of ice hockey though, the extended sport science resources proposed by Durand-Bush and Salmela were unaddressed by Bruner, primarily because his focus was on the transition (initial part of stage three - investment years) to major junior hockey as opposed to post-relocation adjustment and establishment (stage four - maintenance years). In addition, Bruner, similar to Bloom, and Durand-Bush and Salmela, did not consider the impact of age nor location on the support needs of his elite adolescent participants. As indicated earlier of major junior ice hockey, both of these facets are integral to the larger discussion.

Elite sport within physically removed regions

Gauthier and colleagues (2006) were among the first to consider the implications of removed / remote locations for elite coaches, and relevant to this report, also upon elite athletes. Gauthier et al. examined 14 elite Canadian coaches in one removed region. The authors noted that at least within Canada, there were benefits and deficits of pursuing elite sport in a removed region. One benefit was the extensive community support bestowed from media and fans, a benefit that was offset by limited equipment and extensive travel demands. A second benefit was a heightened commitment to the athletic and social adjustment of athletes on the part of coaches, perhaps because this is what it took in order to recruit and retain talent. Players in the removed region also experienced several

Table 1. Demographic data of the subjects.

Athlete	Age	OHL Round Drafted	Years in OHL	OHL Teams Played For	Player Status	Position
1	21	5	4	1	Former	RW
2	19	14	3	1	Current	G
3	19	5	3	2	Current	RW
4	18	4	2	3	Current	C
5	18	6	1	1	Current	D
6	18	4	1	1	Current	RW
7	21	3	5	3	Former	LW
8	20	15	3	1	Current	C
9	21	N/A	5	1	Former	D
10	24	1	4	2	Former	G

challenges unique to their remoteness. They faced extensive travel distances, which in turn impinged upon, or at very least strained their physical, social, and academic development. Typically, the Major Junior Hockey League (MJHL) athletes travel by bus to away games more than 30 per season (Bruner, 2002; Koshan, 2004). For athletes located on teams in removed regions, more time is spent away from school, peers, and family than is typical among more centralized MJHL teams. Extended travel happens weekly (minimum of 800 km round trip excursions), and the consequence is that players are frequently absent from school and social events. It is these benefits and deficits that provide the contextual backdrop of social support resources within a regional and remote location.

The physically removed region: The criteria of what constitutes a physically removed team have not been agreed upon. Herein, a team located in a city of less than 150,000 people and three or more hours from a major urban centre (more than 150,000 people) is considered physically removed. As such, 15 CHL teams, or roughly 360 players (26% of players) play in removed regions of Canada. The region considered within the present report is Northern Ontario, Canada. Among numerous northern locations, the chosen area covers the northern region of one Canadian province. This area was selected for the current project based on its unique geographical characteristics. Northern Ontario's land covers nearly 89% of the province, but only represents a mere 7.4% of its provincial population (http://www.mndm.gov.on.ca). Northern Ontario's population density is 1.0 person per square kilometre, in comparison to its southern Ontario counterpart at 104.3 persons per square kilometre (http://www.mndm.gov.on.ca). These statistics indicate that much of Northern Ontario Canada is uninhabited wilderness and less populated rural areas and communities. It is within Northern Ontario, Canada, that the unique aspects in terms of providers of social support for major junior ice hockey players were considered.

Method

Respondent group and recruitment
The respondent group was comprised of 10 major junior hockey players (Table 1) from two OHL teams located in Northern Ontario (a potential sample of 40 players, the combined roster of both teams). Both team's cities had populations of less than 150 000. Six players were between 18 and 20 years of age, while 4 were 21 years or older. Seven respondents were originally from towns in Northern Ontario, however only two lived with their parents. For the present report, the purpose of interviewing late adolescent-young adult players was to capture their retrospective views of the major junior experience regarding contextual challenges and social support resources.

Patton's (2002) purposive convenience method for participant recruitment was employed. This is where selection of participants is based on their accessibility and their information rich contributions. The researcher was dependent on established relations with current and former players derived from an internship with a minor junior club in that region. The players first participated in the study, then helped direct the researcher to potential respondents (teammates) or player agents (who suggested participants).

Expert panel
An expert panel consisting of three people with an established affiliation to the OHL provided ongoing guidance of the project. Panel members were a former player, a former coach, and a parent of a league player. Combined, these three resources amassed more than 12 years of MJHL experience from different vantage points. Their contributions to this study were in terms of interview guide development, data analysis, and verification.

Question development
Four steps were taken for question development. First, previous research (Bruner, 2002; Rosenfeld and Richman, 1997) and the researcher's experience with junior hockey players helped shape the pre-pilot interview guide. Second, the expert panel reviewed and altered the interview guide to ensure relevance among the respondents. Further, the panel provided insight with regards to wording and lines of questioning. Third, the interview guide was piloted on a former OHL player. Following, the first author, second author, and expert panel agreed that no changes were necessary.

Data Collection
Following informed consent, participants completed a structured, open-ended questionnaire, sent by mail or email, regarding general, OHL, and academic backgrounds. Each participant was then interviewed for approximately 90 minutes, and interviews were taped to allow for a verbatim transcription. All athletes were in their home or their billet's home during the interview and interviews were spread out over the course of one season

Table 2. Sample of interview questions used.

Section 1: General Sport Background	1.	Can you tell me about your general sport background starting from the year or a few months prior to you getting into the OHL leading to the present?
	2.	Can you tell me who helps you with [prompt with identified challenge]?
Section 2: Social Support Resources	3.	How does [family member, coach, teammate, friend, host family, player agent, other identified] help you with [prompt with identified challenge]?
	4.	How was that experience relevant during your middle/late adolescent years?
	5.	Can you share any experiences in regards to how your player agent is supportive?
	6.	Are there any actions from any of the providers of support that you would benefit more from?
	7.	Are there any actions from any of the providers of support that have taken away from your performance? Ideally, how would you improve the situation?
	8.	In regards to the pressures you face, do you receive any help from people that we have not discussed that would benefit the study or better represent your experiences?
Section 3: Debriefing	9.	Are there any other questions or topics that I should have asked about, but didn't regarding your experiences?

and the following off-season. Patton's (2002) semi-structured open-ended interview guidelines (Table 2) and three types of probes were used to gain thick description and detailed recollections: detail probes (e.g., Who helps you deal with academic pressure?), elaboration probes (e.g., Can you explain how that may have helped you balance school demands?), and clarification probes (e.g., You mentioned you had an academic advisor, how was he/she supportive?).

Data analysis

Each interview was transcribed and coded by the first author and names and locations were removed. The data were divided into segments of text that contained a single idea relating to a specific theme (see Tesch, 1990). Herein, each meaning unit was labelled using a respondent-based method (e.g., Athlete 1). The first author and second author developed a preliminary coding system based on the meaning units from the initial stage of respondents (A1-A4). Each group of meaning units were analyzed for similarities or differences using a compare and contrast method with each stage of respondents (A1-A4, A5-A8, A9-A10), and refinements were made to the larger coding scheme. Following of each stage, the expert panel vetted the classification tags based on examples of each category and sub-category, and suggested coding refinement in accordance with the context. A data matrix (see Miles and Huberman, 1994) was created to clarify representation among and between respondents by development stage (Table 3).

Trustworthiness

The researcher ensured trustworthiness by adhering to guidelines set by Maxwell (2002). To ensure descriptive validity, each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Following, the text-format was compared to the audio recording and corrections were made

accordingly. To enhance interpretive validity, the interviewer met with the second author before and after each data collection stage to discuss interpretation of data. For verification purposes, the researcher sent the respondents their transcripts, coded interviews, and an overview of the study's general findings for authentication. Theoretical validity was enhanced when the researchers coded every interview according to emergent categories and sub-categories, and then vetted the coding scheme after each stage of analysis with the expert panel. In terms of generalizability, the trends from this report are limited to one physically removed region, and they indicate that regional strategies should at least be considered within physically removed locations.

Results

Within the present report, the sources and types of social support employed by major junior hockey players during their assignment in one physically removed region were considered. The analysis produced 68 meaning units (MU), with 21 MU falling within emotional challenge support from coaches (4) and teachers (17), 33 MU within shared social reality support from team-mates, and 14 MU within technical appreciation support from the community. The data indicate that the respondents received social support from up to four providers in ways that were unique to their location (Table 3).

Coaches

Coaches were discussed as a provider of emotional challenge support, over and above the more typical technical support provided by elite coaches typically (e.g., technical aspects).

Emotional challenge: Coaches played an integral role in helping the athletes overcome academic challenges by

Table 3. Data matrix.

	Categories	Respondents / Stage
Emotional Challenge	Coaches	R1 (M, L), R4 (L), R7 (M,L), R9 (L)
	Teachers	R1 (M,L), R2 (M,L), R3 (M,L), R4 (M,L), R5 (M,L), R6 (M), R7 (M,L), R8 (M,L), R10 (M,L)
Shared Social Reality	Teammates	R1 (M,L), R2 (M,L), R3 (M,L), R4 (M,L), R5 (M,L), R6 (M), R7 (M,L), R8 (M,L), R9 (M,L), R10 (M,L)
Technical Appreciation	Community	R1 (S), R2 (L), R3 (M), R4 (L), R5 (M), R6 (M), R7 (L), R8 (S), R9 (S), R10 (S)

Abbreviations: M = Middle Adolescence, L = Late Adolescence, S = Same across Stages.

tracking their progress in school. Though such involvement might be regarded as reflective of developmental needs alone, within the present remote region, coaches felt comfortable to monitor their athletes with the assistance of school resources: "I'd say specifically the coaches; they make sure that guys go to class. If guys are missing classes, the schools will call the coaches and they deal with it." (A1) This additional aspect of coach involvement supports Gauthier and colleagues (2006) earlier report whereby coaches from the same region across sports believed that a more general interest and involvement in athlete development were needed to recruit and retain.

Friends within the Team

Team-mates were most frequently discussed with regard to shared social reality. Making friends within the team was considered easy due to the amount of time spent together in sport and non-sport contexts. Though athletes on any team do typically socialize outside of sport, the athletes we elicited suggested that the amount of time spent together in the removed region was above the norm, and consequently contributed to stronger social bonding:

> I went to school with about seven or eight guys in high school. So from there we kind of grew relationships there, which we could take right to the rink. I've heard from other teams from down south, like [city] area, that there is so much going on. Even if guys on the team are good guys, I've heard that other teams are not that close off-ice. Here, I think we're so secluded that everyone just sticks together. Anytime we hang out it's as a team. (A2).

Pushing this point further, the respondents indicated the sorts of activities they did together, and how these social events contributed to team bonding:

> There's not really a whole lot to do in the North. A thing that we did is if we had a day off, some of the guys would go ice fishing. There are some other guys that live in the North, like me, so they enjoy the outdoor stuff that I've experienced growing up. Whereas guys that live in the South but play in the North, they don't really know what ice fishing, snow machining, tobogganing is. What we do is we get together and show them the things that we do to pass time. (A4)

Teachers

Teachers, both high school and university, were most frequently discussed among the respondents with regards to emotional challenge support. All respondents discussed the level of understanding and support received from teachers. It appeared as though teachers were aware of the regional challenges that could have affected the completion of school assignments, and so rules were bent to accommodate:

> I was the only OHL player in that high school when I went. I always had good relationships with my teachers. I hit the OHL in tenth grade. I immediately discussed with my teachers that there would be times when I would be missing class, or there

would be times when I wouldn't be able to make a certain assignment deadline. They totally understood, and after a while they really started to get involved and actually even came to games. (A1)

When discussing school attendance while in the region, several of the players identified the help they received from teachers. The following athlete explained the advantage of being enrolled in a smaller school, as opposed to one in a larger urban centre where the schools had a larger student population, and elite junior ice hockey was no big deal:

> It was a smaller school so they all knew you. I had a few friends in [larger urban center] and that's a lot different. There you have a school of a thousand people. For me it was pretty easy here. The teachers were supportive and they paid special attention. You weren't there as much, so they would help. (A8)

The involvement of teachers (and university professors) extended beyond the willingness to allow for ongoing extensive travel demands. As indicated earlier, academic teachers also liaised with sport coaches to ensure that the athletes developed holistically, not just as athletes. It was this personal attention that the athletes regarded as reflective of their location.

Community

All of the athletes without exception identified community as a unique source of support to a remote region. The community supported the athletes emotionally, and also in terms of technical challenge. This support was evident in daily life, and also at games.

Emotional support: Within the region, there were few sources of sport entertainment. As a result, heavy community attendance at games was one way that the athletes experienced community emotional support like nowhere else:

> Well it [hockey] is a lot bigger in Northern Ontario than say (more centralized locations). In Northern Ontario you have fans in the rink all the time. In other locations, it's empty depending on where you're playing. If there's a (professional) team around the (city) there are no fans, nobody knows who you are. (A3)

> So I definitely think [city] has the best fans for that. They're unbelievable, they stand behind you, and they're always cheery. It's definitely a credit to them...the success that the team has is definitely not just a reflection of the guys they have in the room and the coaching staff, but it's the support they get. It's definitely a big thing; it's almost like having a sixth player on the ice or in the stands. It adds weight coming into a building saying, "man I hate playing here". (A9)

Technical challenge: However, as articulated by one athlete, community support could also be a matter of

holding the athletes and team accountable. The expectation was for rough and committed blue-collar performance, and when this was not delivered, team members were held to task. The community's message was that remoteness cultivates certain behaviours including mental and physical toughness, and that the athletes needed to reflect these values on the ice:

People are asking all the time "What happened?" or "What's going on?" or "How come things didn't work out?" Everybody's just expecting you, since you've already dominated as an athlete, people just can't seem to understand what's going on and some people just expect too much. (A10)

I think another challenge that some players would face is within the community they're playing in. There are some people that absolutely love the players representing their city. It all depends on how good the team is doing. For example, when I first got to [location], the team wasn't doing very well. So, when you go out in public people that you don't even know on the street would know who you are and they would look at you. (A4)

Discussion

This report delineated social support in major junior hockey adapted to the removed region. Though the present report overviews unique data representative of social support provision in a remote region, some results are similar to those of Bruner (2002) in terms of by whom the support was provided, and so they are presented as traditional. Other data are unique findings in terms of providers, and are denoted herein as emergent.

Traditional Resources

Several support resources were matched with those identified in previous sport literature, though only two (the ones we have included as part of the present report) provided assistance that addressed adaptation to the remote region – coaches and teammates.

Coaches: Coaches have been cited frequently within the social support literature as a source of sport-specific social support among aspiring elite athletes. Rosenfeld and colleagues (1989) for instance, found that coaches provide support in terms of sport expertise (technical challenge support and technical appreciation). Bloom (1985) as well as Durand-Bush and Salmela (2002) added that as athletes progress in their development to the elite level, coaches increase their involvement in terms of the aforementioned support types to match with increasing technical demands. In major junior hockey, Bruner (2002), perhaps echoing a more general tendency across sports, indicated why coaches purposefully emphasize sport-related assistance over other more general supportive behaviours (e.g., listening, emotional, shared social reality): to maintain a professional distance. Data from the present report reaffirmed the importance of coaches as a valuable support resource at the elite level, but in ways that extended beyond those identified by Rosenfeld and colleagues (1989),

Bloom (1985), Durand-Bush and Salmela (2002), and Bruner (2002). Supporting Gauthier et al. (2006) data from elite coaches located in the same remote region as presently addressed, it seems that the region's coaches are well aware of the challenges experienced by their athletes given the remote region. Consequently, the coaches responded with a wider array of buffering strategies including emotional support and academic guidance. In relation to academic challenges for instance, the coaches knew that extensive time allotted to travel would make or break the academic development of their athletes depending on how that time was used. To ensure athlete adaptation then, the athletes' academic developments were carefully monitored.

Teammates: Within the earlier literature, Rosenfeld and Richman (1997) noted that belonging to a sport team establishes a strong tie with a formalized social group, as athletes have similar abilities, competitive attitudes, and more general social constraints (e.g., limited time to make friends outside of sport, academic scheduling challenges). Contextualized in relation to elite ice hockey, Botterill (2004) and Halliwell (2004) explained that elite athletes support each other because the challenges experienced by one are shared among the group (shared social reality). Given these challenges at the major junior level, Koshan (2004) learned while placed within the context as part of an applied internship that shared training and performance-related demands lead to team socializing outside of sport. In keeping with Botterill (2004), Halliwell (2004), and Koshan (2004), our respondents indicated that teammates provided shared social reality and technical challenge support. Even more pertinent to the present report, there is also evidence that physical location might have played a part in relation to increased support from teammates. While it was not unique that teammates became friends, the frequency of shared activities among teammates in the removed region was often the result of forged relationships facilitated in part by extensive travel (e.g., time on the bus, time away from non-sport peers, and time away from family while travelling, relocating, or both).

Emergent sources

There were two emergent sources when data from the present report is contrasted with non-remote social support literature – academic teachers and the community.

Academic teachers: Academic teachers were an emergent support provider for the respondents within the present remote region, for reasons that have just recently been explained within the literature. Recently, Koshan (2004) identified that there is a broad range of challenges associated with balancing ice hockey and school while one is performing at the elite junior level. It should be noted that Koshan's earlier report was written in relation to one ice hockey team located within close proximity to most of the other teams within the Ontario Hockey League (the Ottawa – Toronto – London, Ontario corridor). Even within the more centralized location, it was noted that elite junior ice hockey players struggled with academic demands, mostly because they travel an average of 300 kilometres (return trip) as part of general and post-season demands.

Within the remote region of Northern Ontario, travel demands were exceedingly more difficult to manage by the athletes. Athletes were expected to travel 700-800 kilometre (minimum) round trips at least once weekly. As a consequence, the athletes were often absent from school, and required assistance from teachers in order to progress with their studies. Assistance was sought from teachers (high school teachers and university professors alike) in terms of registration, school assignments, obtaining materials, and exam scheduling. Over and above these more technical aspects of academic support, most likely as a result of where the respondents were located, their academic mentors also became interested in the athletes as students and performers. The more general approach to support included ongoing liaising with coaching staff, and so a comprehensive approach to support that contributed to athlete retention given the challenges previously identified by Gauthier and colleagues (2006).

Community: Within the social support literature, general community resources have only started to surface. Earlier, Gauthier and colleagues (2006) identified that community resources are an important support provider at least within the present remote region. The providers identified by Gauthier et al. contributed audience support at games and during daily encounters, and corporate and personal sponsorship. Within the present report, community resources were identified once more as a pivotal among aspiring elite athletes located within the same region. From the perspectives of the elite junior ice hockey players (respondents), community fans were identified most often as synonymous with community support. The constrained parameter set on "community" by the athletes is understandable given that elite junior ice hockey players do not seek out local sponsorship, at least not until they have already been drafted to the senior professional levels. Instead, teams and team management benefit from community sponsorship within major junior ice hockey. Consequently, what was noticed most among the respondents was fan involvement, at games and also during daily life away from the sport context. While at home games, fans expected a blue-collar work ethic, and also appreciated highly skilled performance. Games were described as heavily attended, and fan behaviour was described as highly supportive to the point of rowdiness. Away from the sport context, the athletes were regarded as celebrities within the remote region, and thus were recognizable to fans, daily. Counterbalanced with high status, when performances were regarded by the fan base as sub-standard the athletes were held accountable. The involvement of community members to some extent (attendance at games) resembled the experiences of professional athletes within the National Hockey League as identified by Schinke and colleagues (2007, in press). Within the remote region however, major junior athletes were the highest standard of performance available, and so community members considered them as the sport representatives from the region.

Limitations of the study
There were several limitations that pertain to this study. The first concern relates to participant recruitment. Previ-

ously, Bruner (2002) noted that team management and league executives refused to endorse his study "for fear of exposing a weakness in their organization or the OHL [larger governing body]" (p. 60). This was true for the present study as well, which led to difficulty recruiting participants despite assistance from an expert panel. As such, the first author was constrained to a limited pool of athletes, recruited by word of mouth, in place of formal endorsement. Second, retrospective interviewing does not always allow for accurate insight into respondents' experiences. This is attributed to the higher level of critical thinking required as well as the level of detailed recollections of past experiences. It was plausible that what was relevant during the moment of recall reflected one's current stage of development as opposed to an earlier point in time. Third, the present study was limited in that remoteness was considered in relation to one region in one country. Non-comparative studies such as the present have been shown to be beneficial to understanding a particular theme or phenomenon (Côté et al., 1995; Gauthier et al., 2006). However, while this study does identify several characteristics of social support in one removed region, future studies should include a comparative aspect across regions.

Recommendations for practice
The goal of this research was to learn from the players' perspectives, social support resources at the major junior level within one removed region. From the report, as well as research conducted by Gauthier and colleagues (2006) it seems that within Canada, elite athletes can, and sometimes do pursue their sport careers while located in removed locations. Both reports suggest that social support involvement within such settings is necessary. Precisely, there are challenges associated with being further from family, a change in social reality, and extensive travel to more centralized opposing teams and the logistical challenges associated with such travel (e.g., less time with non-sport peers, absenteeism from school). Consequently, from the current report it is proposed that athletes performing in physically removed regions and facing similar challenges might require additional support providers (e.g. player agents), or atypical support from well-documented providers (e.g. coaches). Further, there is indication that the athlete's adolescent stage should also factor within the larger discussion of service provision. All said, the coach or sport scientist assisting athletes from or within remote locations, should at least consider whether similar challenges exist within their context, and if they do, how best to assist aspiring athletes while they mature as elite athletes.

Conclusion

Upon final reflection, within the present report we have proposed that regionally based research is sometimes an important aspect that one might consider within the sport sciences. To the present, many have assumed that the experiences of elite athletes are similar (if not identical) from one region to the next. What we have started to realize is that there are sometimes distinct aspects / challenges encountered by elite athletes pursuing sporting

excellence in for instance remote geographical locations. Within the present report, there is some indication that the social support resources sought out by elite athletes within remote locations such as Northern Ontario, Canada can reflect in more involved community support, and also a closer bond with teachers and professors. It is our hope that others might consider the aspect of region – specific research within the sport scientists, and in so doing, identify other nuances by region.

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Key points

- The study extends knowledge about the sources and types of social support resourced by elite major junior ice hockey players located in one physically removed Canadian region.
- From the respondents' views, three types of social support were sought from four different sources.
- Implications are considered in terms of sport psychology research and applied practice.

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