

MAKING NHL A VERY LONG SHOT

Kids' chances about 1 in 4,000 ` Each level gets harder and harder'

There is little doubt that New York Rangers centre Adam Graves and Carolina Hurricanes winger Jeff Daniels have beaten the odds.

But it wasn't easy.

A new study shows that the chances of going from minor hockey to a steady NHL career are roughly one in 4,000; long odds indeed.

The study by Jim Parcels, a 13-year veteran of minor and junior hockey in the province, found that of the 360,000 or so kids born in Ontario in 1968, 32,000 went on to play minor hockey of some kind. Of those, 223 were drafted into the Ontario Hockey League and 65 were subsequently drafted into the NHL (there were 12 rounds then instead of nine as it is today).

Only eight — or one in 4,000 — have played at least 400 games in the NHL or 180 games in net (enough to qualify for the NHLPA pension). And of those, only four are still in the NHL: Graves, Daniels, Boston goaltender Jeff Hackett and Buffalo winger Rob Ray.

A couple years ago, Parcels published an oft-quoted study of Ontario players born in 1975. He recently updated his figures for those born in 1968.

"There is no real trend," he said when asked about the differences between the 1975 and 1968 studies. "It comes and goes. There are years like 1976 where there are fewer Ontario players who have made the NHL but you may get quality like Jeff O'Neill or Ed Jovanovski.

"The big surprise for me is the type of player who has longevity," he said. "There's gritty (Graves), enforcers (Ray) or a backup goalie (Hackett). There are no scoring stars."

Parcels' work comes as no surprise to Cory McNabb, director of hockey development for the Canadian Hockey Association.

"We have 560,000 minor hockey players registered in Canada," McNabb said. "It's a very small chance a player will make it."

"That's awesome," Graves said when told he was one of only four NHLers born in Ontario in 1968.

"I would have thought there were more.

"When I went to Leaf games with my dad, I watched them warm up at Maple Leaf Gardens but I never thought of myself in the NHL," added Graves, who has two Stanley Cup rings. "It was far away, too far away for me. Right now I'm thankful for what the game has provided for me."

Graves played for the Toronto Young Nationals at age 15 but at only 5-foot-4 and 130 pounds, he was passed over that year in the OHL draft. Sean Williams, Graves' teammate on the Young Nats, was drafted straight from bantam hockey but ended up playing just two games in the NHL. Graves sprouted the next year and was taken in the first round of the draft by the Windsor Spitfires.

"You have to continue to work at being on top of yourself physically and mentally to succeed," Graves said, passing along a little advice for those who fantasize about an NHL career.

"The game has evolved since I came into the league. It's the size of the players, the speed, the attention to detail. When I came in, at 6 feet and 180 pounds I was average in stature. Now I'm smaller and the defencemen are 6-foot-2 or 6-foot-3."

Yet Graves, a gritty player with a good scoring touch, has had a solid career compared to some.

Since turning pro 15 years ago, Daniels has played with 11 different NHL and minor-league teams: Muskegon, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Florida, Detroit (IHL), Hartford, Springfield, Carolina (twice), New Haven, Nashville and Milwaukee.

"It's not all glamorous," Daniels said. "It's the stuff behind the scenes. There is no security. It's here today, gone tomorrow. It takes a lot of hard work and determination. I've had some highs and some lows ... but I have no regrets."

Daniels warns young professional players to be financially smart and save as much as they can while they are earning.

"All it takes is one injury, one freak accident at that age and your career is over," Daniels said. "You need a lot of luck, good bounces. Although some players light up minor hockey all the way through, each level gets harder and harder. Just because you score lots of goals at peewee and bantam doesn't mean it will continue."

"I call Jeff a survivor," said Daniels' father, Wayne, a former GM of the Oshawa Generals and NHL scout. "It's very tough, very hard for kids like him. He's had to accept his role as a fourth-line centre. Half of Jeff's career has been in the minors and that happens when you're on

good teams like Pittsburgh, with Mario Lemieux, Jaromir Jagr and Ron Francis."

The CHA's McNabb has a word of caution for hockey parents who dream of their sons making it to the NHL.

"Those who succeed must have natural talent," he said. "Some just don't have it. Parents shouldn't pressure kids but rather encourage them. ... In the school system we don't teach multiplication before a child can add. These youngsters need to develop fundamentals."

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