

The Effect of Athlete Migration on Czech Ice Hockey: A 25 Year Study

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Aim

The aim of this paper is to outline the flow of sporting migrants out of and into the Czech Republic in light of the primary cultural position of the sport in the culture and the position of Czech ice hockey on a global scale.

Research Questions:

- 1) Can the increases in ice hockey migration flows be significantly correlated with indicators of cultural positioning of the sport such as the number of registered players and fan attendance?
- 2) Based on the global positioning of Czech ice hockey, do exports outweigh imports or vice versa, and what factors have influenced these flows over the last 25 years?
- 3) Where are Czech ice hockey players leaving to ply their trade, and what countries provide the imported labor? To what degree does this resulting map illustrate the globalization of the game of ice hockey?

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Maguire first wrote about sport migration using Canadian ice hockey players playing in Great Britain (1996). He further delved into the influence and response to Canadians in European ice hockey, while still focusing on Great Britain where ice hockey is a secondary or periphery sport in the culture (Elliott & Maguire, 2008; Maguire & Falcous, 2010). This is in stark contrast to the position of ice hockey in the Czech Republic, where ice hockey is sport number one and a primary shaper of national identity. Thus Czech has much to gain or lose through the global expansion of ice hockey.

The expansion of the NHL, and the establishment of the 25 team KHL, has created an increased demand for players, with both leagues' teams supported by budgets which far outweigh those of teams further down the supply chain. Research has clearly shown that players developed where the sport is primary, and the level of competition is high, have a better chance at success (Bruner, Macdonald, Pickett, & Côté, 2011). While this represents common sense knowledge, the effect is significant in sport migration and the establishment in winners and losers in global sport. Poli has attempted to clearly define these winners and losers in terms of global football through networks and structural inequalities (2010). We attempt here to see how these networks and inequalities have affected Czech ice hockey migration.

Maguire (among others researching other sports) postures that sport migration leads to a talent drain and consequent decrease in the number of youth taking up the sport of ice hockey (Maguire, 1996; Maguire & Falcous, 2010). Humphreys argues the opposite effect, that the possibility of sport migration actually leads to increased investment by both governments and individual athletes in the sport in terms of finances and specialized training time, as well as increases in youth drawn to the sport (Humphreys & Munich, 2008). This study examines the developments of ice hockey migration and their effects on Czech ice hockey over a 25-year period in order to ascertain which conclusion more accurately describes the state of Czech ice hockey in today's globalized world.

Research Design and Data Analysis

Data from 1993-2018 was collected regarding information on Czechs, imports, and attendance figures in the top two Czech leagues, as well as locations of play for Czech exports, and IIHF rankings. All data was analyzed to identify migration networks and patterns, and correlations were calculated between individual variables measured.

Results

- Czech exports were on average three times greater than Czech imports. Exports ranging from a low of 96 to 325, and imports from 19 to 152.
- Slovaks represented between 56% and 97% of all foreign import players, with other leading importers being neighboring states and hockey hotbed nations.
- Export leagues increased from 19 to 29, while imports were limited to 8-10 nations.
- Exports were correlated to imports at .870, imports to attendance at .850, and imports to IIHF rankings at .745. All other correlations were significantly lower.
- The most important year was the 2004-05 season with the NHL lockout bringing home the best Czech players and pushing Czech players at home both down and out to other leagues. This corresponded with the Czech ascension to the EU in 2004 which made it easier for Czechs to leave home.

Conclusion and Implications

Migration out of Czech primarily to the NHL, but also to international junior leagues increased while Czechs moved among the top three spots of the IIHF tables. The movement of Czechs to the leagues outside of Czech did lead to increases in foreigners coming into the top two leagues, but excluding neighboring Slovaks, these imports were relatively insignificant and in both leagues were positively correlated with league attendance. We find that sport migration patterns are not so different from other industries in terms of labor relations where athletes are the commodities produced and consumed on an ever-widening scale (Humphreys & Munich, 2008).

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