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2021



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## PEER-TO-PEER

# 1-ON-1 WITH PAUL KELLY

The former head of the NHLPA and College Hockey Inc. talks about his life in the game **WITH W. GRAEME ROUSTAN**

**THE HOCKEY NEWS' OWNER** and publisher spoke with lawyer Paul Kelly as part of his Peer-To-Peer series.

**W. GRAEME ROUSTAN:** Let's spend a few minutes on your hockey history, which is very long. That's a whole magazine in and of itself. Maybe you could take us back to how you became the executive director of the NHL Players' Association first, before we get into College Hockey Inc.

**PAUL KELLY:** I was the lead prosecutor for the Department of Justice in connection with the investigation and prosecution of Alan Eagleson. I started playing the sport at probably

age four or five. I played all through high school and into college, and I coached youth hockey for many, many years. When the Eagleson investigation started, I was working in an office of about 150 prosecutors, but I was the only one who was simultaneously a high-school hockey coach. So the case got assigned to me. Through that process, I met an awful lot of people within the NHL. Owners, players, general managers and others. Eagleson, of course, was convicted and sentenced. Years went by, then I received a phone call from a headhunting firm in Chicago asking me if I had any interest in being an applicant for the executive director of the NHL Players' Association. I first thought it was a

bit of a joke, since I had put the last guy in prison, but they assured me that it was not. I went through a process that was very thorough, it went on for two or three months. And at the end of the process, they asked me if I would take on the role, which I did as of roughly August 2007 or so. When I left the role a couple of years later, I was thinking about returning to the practice of law. I had a thriving legal practice when I left to go to the NHLPA, and I was thinking about returning to that, but I was contacted by a number of prominent U.S. college hockey coaches and commissioners of the various leagues around the country, asking me for my help. What they told me at the time was that NCAA hockey folks felt that they needed a spokesperson, someone that was connected within the world of hockey, that could communicate, not only with the NHL on their behalf, but could help deal with some NCAA issues they had. They were concerned about recruiting, they wanted to do a better job of getting the word out generally, not only to players within the United States but players within Canada and in Europe, about the benefits of playing NCAA college hockey, and how that would be a good thing for them to think about. So, these coaches and commissioners asked me if I could start something. In connection with USA Hockey, they had a slug of money that was available for purposes of a start-up and salary and the like, and so they said, "Look, do whatever you think is necessary and just help us." So, it sounded intriguing and challenging, and given my love of the sport, I decided to do it. We started with nothing. The first thing I did was found a name that I could protect legally. I came up with "College Hockey Inc." So, we

started College Hockey Inc. in, I believe, October 2009. It has grown since then. It is still in place today. And our mission was to travel around the continent and to talk to young players about the benefits of playing college hockey. Not only the athletic benefits and the game itself, but also about the benefits of getting an education, being on a college campus, maturing as a person. And we would go to Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Calgary, Vancouver, I mean, we travelled throughout Canada, and we would typically bring with us a group of college hockey coaches as well, to the extent they were available and not in the midst of the season, and we would get NHL players who, themselves, played college hockey. Ryan Miller was one. We had a number of guys that came out with us. And they would talk to the players directly about their experience and playing at many of the great schools that play college hockey down here. And we would pull together a group of usually 60 or so players, the top players in a particular geographic area, we would invite them and their parents to join us. We would make a presentation to the group, answer questions, let them hear from the coaches and the players. And then, we would typically run some games. We would have the college coaches, actually, behind the benches, so they could kind of get to know these players and watch them on the ice. And it would give the college coaches an opportunity to scout and see some of these kids and give them some exposure. And so, I think we were very successful in getting the message out to people that hadn't heard the message directly. And while we weren't recruiting for any specific team, any specific college, we were recruiting for the sport generally. And in addition to that, because of my connections

from the NHLPA days, we also suddenly gave college hockey a voice in some circles and boardrooms that they didn't have a voice in before. We attended the NHL GMs' meetings from time to time, talked to the GMs about issues. We met with agents. We met with the international community. So overall, No. 1, it was a fun effort. I did it for two-and-a-half years, and once I got it up and running and thought it was doing well, it was time for me to move back into the practice of law and let it be carried on by others.

**WGR:** Opening the doors to the U.S. colleges, it caused some ripples elsewhere. In any business, there's a competition for talent, whether it's employees or customers. And whenever there's a new entrant into any space, there's some friction. Did you feel any friction?

**PK:** There's no question that that was the case. And it's a bit of an unfortunate part of it. I wish there was an easy answer to that, but the reality is that the NCAA programs are seeking the top talented kids, not just in North America but across the world. And so it puts them into direct competition with the Canadian Hockey League in particular. Our effort wasn't to do harm to the CHL. Far from it. It was just to get the word out to give families options, so that they knew what was out there and they knew what steps, if they took them, would destroy their eligibility. So there are certain things that, if you sign a contract or you play on a team with professionals, that impacts your NCAA eligibility. And so we wanted to make sure that kids at ages 14, 15, 16 and their families understood some of those rules. I really do wish that there was a way to harmonize what the NCAA is all about with what the CHL is all about. Because I think there are some players who really would benefit by playing college hockey. And it would be the right fit for them. And there are other players that it wouldn't be the right fit. And the CHL is a terrific program, they turn out terrific players. It was not my intention

to do damage. But clearly, since I was up there passing this message along and recruiting, effectively, I'm sure that I was viewed in a negative way by some of those folks up there. It really was all about what's best for young players and families. One example, I got a call from a mom just last week, from Detroit. And her son went and played one year in the CHL and apparently didn't have the best of experiences. He now has an opportunity to play college hockey, and he's got a number of programs that would like him to come and play. The problem is, of course, he played

a better widget, a better tool, a better iPhone, you're going to create some waves.

**PK:** I think that's exactly what our mission was, it was to educate. And to let them know that the options were out there and what were the benefits of the two programs. It was to just present alternatives and make sure that people understood what was out there. I do think we've seen an increase in the number, the percentage, of NCAA players (in the NHL) over time. Some of your top players in the NHL today are NCAA players. Part of the reason for that, I think, is you play

rules that make it somewhat challenging, given the NCAA rules. There's a constant conversation going on with the NCAA as to how to make those rules workable for families and for young players. But I think College Hockey Inc. will continue to do what it's doing, which is listen to its coaches, find out what their issues are and how they think it could be most helpful as an independent organization, as a mouthpiece, and continue to get the word out. Using the young players of today, the guys that have come out in the last couple of years, the young players around the



for one year in the CHL and he signed the required contract, and she wants to know, "Is there some way that he can now go play for these schools that are recruiting him?" And I do wish that the NCAA would change some of its rules. Because that's a perfect situation where, look, he tried the CHL and, for whatever reason, it wasn't a good fit, he ought to be able to come and play college hockey. He shouldn't be barred because of some archaic NCAA rules. And so, I'm a bit of a critic when it comes to that. I do think there's a way to harmonize our systems, just for the benefit of hockey generally. But you're right, there has been some friction. It's unfortunate, but it's a reality.

**WGR:** But isn't that the way it is in business? In any business you're in, if you come up with

with older players when you tend to be between the ages of 18 and 25, with the majority of them being in their early 20s. So you tend to be playing against bigger, stronger players. In the CHL, where you've got players that are 16, 17, 18, they don't have the physical size and stature of a lot of the NCAA players. And I think that does prepare some players better for the rough-and-tumble style of the NHL.

**WGR:** So what's the future business outlook for College Hockey Inc.?

**PK:** I know that they'd like to focus more on attracting top players from Europe, from Sweden and from Finland. The leagues over there have some

continent, they know these guys, they respect these guys. When they stand up in front of these groups of 60 kids, you just watch these kids' eyes light up. They listen to every word. I mean, they're so totally focused when they hear from these NHL players. That's important, to make that connection. But again, there's a path for everyone. The CHL is a great path for most of these kids up there, but the NCAA is a really terrific opportunity. If you're good enough to play and you're good enough to balance having an education and playing at the same time, playing college hockey is really a good thing to do. **H**

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