



## Masters and Grand Masters Hockey – 5 Years On?

### **An assessment of the development potential of the IMHA and WGMA**

#### **The Rationale for the Study:**

Following a critical analysis of past IMHA and WGMA World Cups, I collated information from the joint presentation made to the FIH Congress and combined this with my experience as a player and organiser of IMHA and WGMA tournaments, a manager in education and industry and what I have learned from previous research as a consultant.

This study is built around what I will predict may happen based on life experiences and previous history. I cannot state with absolute certainty that my predictions are the only possibilities, but my interpretation of evidence to date suggests that there is a good case for estimating that they are quite likely. The positives and negatives identified in the study are my interpretations of potential outcomes based upon feedback from Masters' players from a wide range of age groups. As with all theoretical outcomes, those outlined here are only as reliable as the data in my research, which was gathered through informal discussions. Whilst the feasibility of the proposals and predictions are open for debate and challenge, this exercise, if used as a starting point for focused discussion on the way ahead for Masters Hockey, is valid. The IMHA and WGMA have been very successful to date, but there are weaknesses which will have to be addressed if the same is to be said over the coming decades. It must be remembered that IMHA and WGMA tournaments are far larger than any FIH organised tournament.

#### **Issues:**

There are relatively few major issues facing these organisations in the next 5 years. The number of teams is growing, but the pace of this increase will lessen as the number of countries where players have sufficient disposable income to pay for travel to World Cups and even Continental Championships on the larger continents, reaches its peak.

The number of **European** sides will continue to grow as more players stay in the game for longer. They are likely to have the levels of disposable income to be able to afford to travel to tournaments around the world.

While the number of teams from **Africa, Asia and South America** will increase, most are likely to remain within their continents due to their low level of disposable income and the high cost of travel relative to their income. They may even find it difficult to afford travel within their own continent for the same reasons. This issue poses an interesting question. If Masters and Grand Masters Hockey are to continue spreading across the planet, how will these problems be overcome? If teams only ever play against their neighbouring countries, the incentive to stay in the game may decline, as will the recent successful growth rate. Life expectancy in some areas on these continents is relatively low so the number of hockey players reaching older Masters' ages will also be low.

**North America** has relatively few countries, but its Masters Hockey players are probably amongst the wealthiest in terms of disposable income levels. In the short term, an increasing number of teams from the USA and Canada will have a positive impact, but their near neighbours have similar economic issues to many in Africa, Asia and South America. The most populous continents are the least able to contribute greatly to continuing short term growth of Masters Hockey without substantial economic investment.

The **Middle East** has potential to increase the number of teams involved in the sport, but cultural issues and the reluctance of Western nations to travel there, may pose problems to their hosting tournaments. Middle Eastern teams are likely to have sufficient funding to pay for travel to tournaments elsewhere, but given the ongoing turmoil in the region, any interest is likely to be isolated to the smaller Gulf States. The impact of involvement is therefore likely to be relatively low.

The numbers of **Women's** teams will continue to increase slowly, but it is unlikely that the rate of increase will replicate that of the Men's game. Some of this will be due to economic issues as previously described, but with the trend for women in the developed world having children later in life the resulting demands of child care are likely to impact on the growth rate of their participation. Culturally, fewer husbands/partners are willing to 'allow' their wives/partners to disappear for up to 10 days, leaving them with the child care, than is true in the reverse. In some cultures, women are not allowed to play hockey at Masters' level as they are expected to stay and run the home and the family.

The prospect for continuing longer term growth is therefore very dependent upon changes in cultural attitudes and increased wealth in the developing nations, or funding which will enable such countries to fully participate.

However, the picture is not quite as simple as that. Interesting anomalies of attitude can be found within the mind-set of some players in the developed countries. Some member countries are reluctant to travel far from home, leaving tournaments in the Far East and Oceania relatively poorly supported by European teams. The irony of this attitude is that these same countries are very disappointed if the Asian and Oceanic member countries do not travel to tournaments in Europe. Is there a point at which the players in Asian and Oceanic countries will refuse to continually dig deep to travel to Europe and adopt the same attitude as some of their European rivals? Presently, only Japan and Hong Kong regularly travel to Europe from Asia. If this attitude spreads, Masters Hockey might well return to being limited to continental competition only.

### **Player Attitudes:**

#### ***These attitudes change with age.***

The **35+, 40+ and 45+** men are generally focused upon playing hockey with little interest in experiencing the cultural or touristic highlights of the host country. They tend to want to play hockey every day to reduce the tournament to as few days as is possible. They tend not to travel with their wives/partners or family and many have to squeeze these tournaments into their employer's holiday allowance, which can put them under pressure where their families are concerned. And, if the timing of tournaments does not match their holiday entitlement dates, top class players may have to drop out, impacting upon the quality of hockey on show. Employers do not yet see Masters World or Continental Championships as being on the same level as Senior World or Continental Championships. The cost of these tournaments can also be relatively high in a number of ways given that only the players tend to benefit from such spending, at the expense of their family.

These players appear not to be interested in having the 18 hour gap or a day's rest between matches as this all extends the length and expense of the tournament and increases the level of opposition they face from their families. Therefore to maintain their interest in staying in the game, tournaments organisers may have to consider these players' needs before those of FIH tournament regulations/recommendations. This age group tends to have fewer physical problems with regard to playing a high number of games in a relatively short space of time. Many are still playing a high level of league hockey at home with relevant levels of fitness. It should be noted that developing a viable number of 35+ women's teams over the shorter term poses a significant challenge for the IMHA.

The **50+, 55+ and 60+** men progressively change their attitude towards the set up and length of tournaments as they move up the age bands. Their children tend to be teenagers who can look after themselves, if their parents are away on 'holiday'. More of their wives/partners accompany them to major tournaments and many are in an employment position whereby they can negotiate time off with more flexibility. They also tend to want to experience the cultural and touristic delights of the host country and will add a few days on to include these kinds of activities. Generally they have a higher level of disposable income and usually have fewer family pressures/issues with which to contend.

Physically, age starts to take its toll and these players generally prefer to have matches spread out over more days to allow them to recover between games and have any muscle strains treated. Additionally there is an increasing interest in the social elements offered at these tournaments. This focus on the social events is more noticeable with the 60+ age group, although hockey is still the most important aspect of any tournament attended.

The **65+, 70+ and 75+** men have generally reached the point where the hockey and the social events are almost equally important. They still want to play, win and compete at the highest level they can physically manage, but they tend to be more philosophical about the sport and the outcomes of matches. The social events and spending time with the opposition after matches enhances the ambiance and enjoyment of a tournament. These players tend to need longer to recover between matches, but due to their having fewer work or family pressures upon them, are generally able to combine tournaments and holidays bringing family members with them.

For women, the picture is relatively similar at the same age groups even if the pressures are as described in earlier paragraphs. However, the camaraderie between and within the women's teams seems to be very important to enhancing the enjoyment of a tournament for all the age groups.

### **Implications for the IMHA, WGMA and FIH:**

#### ***Main scenarios:***

1. If the number of teams continues to increase in the short term with no change to tournament organisation, the IMHA will be unable to meet the differing needs of its members with potential future drops in the number of teams entering tournaments and the number of players staying in the game at club level due to the lack of incentive. Potentially the greatest increases and losses would occur amongst the younger age groups, which could lead to a lower number of players progressing through the IMHA age groups onto those of the WGMA.
2. Given a continued increase in teams over the short term, if tournaments are organised as previously, there will be too many teams for most nations to host a World Cup or European Championship. Only HCs Rotterdam and Tilburg can offer sufficient pitches to host future IMHA or WGMA tournaments if the predicted increase in team numbers becomes reality. Our members will not wish to continually travel to the Netherlands for the big tournaments. As it is there have already been complaints about the number of tournaments in Europe, especially in England. The Masters organisations therefore will have to carefully consider the varying needs of their memberships to avoid breeding disaffection towards international competition.
3. The FIH, in order to attract a wide range of funding, especially from government bodies, has to prove that hockey is a sport which can be played from 'cradle to the grave'. The success of the Masters organisations is therefore very important in that regard. Any collapse in the numbers of Masters' players could impact upon the FIH's long term plans. The FIH has limited human and financial resources and key FIH officials and members of the Executive Boards and Committees are still in the early stages of fully understanding how their decisions impact upon the officials and members of the IMHA and WGMA. Therefore, the best way forward is for the IMHA and WGMA to conceive alternative ways of running future tournaments.

### **Possible Tournament Structures:**

#### **1. Re-structuring of Age Bands**

**Stage 1:** 35+, 40+ and 45+;

**Stage 2:** 50+, 55+ and 60+;

**Stage 3:** 65+, 70+ and 75+;

#### **Pros:**

- i. Tournaments could be organised over time periods which would best meet the needs of the players in the relevant age bands as summarised in the above section '**Player Attitudes**'.
- ii. Following current trends, a maximum of around 60 Men's and Women's teams would enter a Stage 1 age-group World Cup, with a likely maximum of 50 teams for a Stage 2 age-group World Cup, and a likely maximum of 40 teams for a Stage 3 age-group World Cup. Each of these could be successfully organised on a complex with only 2 pitches and this would enable a wider range of nations to host World Cups and raise the profile of Masters Hockey in more countries. A similar approach could be adopted for Continental Championships although the success of this would greatly depend upon the number of member countries on some continents where hockey is viewed as a relatively minor sport. Where it exists floodlighting could be used to increase the number of games in a day and shorten the length of a tournament.
- iii. The 3 World Cup tournaments could be held on different continents, which might help alleviate FIH concerns about the co-ordination of Senior and Masters' events and avoid players returning to the same location several years in a row.
- iv. The lower numbers of teams at Stage 3 World Cups would enable the inclusion of Tournament Trophy competitions without creating undue pressure on the host club facilities and/or match scheduling. Similarly, in years where fewer teams enter the main tournaments for younger Age Bands, Tournament Trophy competitions could be devised to allow touring teams to take part and ensure these World Cups were viable economically.
- v. The proposed Age Band re-structuring ensures that the 60+ women's preference for participating in the same location as younger women's teams is more easily met. Where there are a low number of women's teams across the age ranges in a given year, all the women's teams could compete at one location.

- vi. Hosting fees could be reduced for each of the tournaments, whilst providing the same overall income for the two associations, thereby enabling more member nations to confidently apply to host these tournaments.

**Cons:**

- i. The 60+ age group, presently under the auspices of the WGMA, would move to a section which is currently organised by the IMHA. This could create administration issues, but given that the Women's 60+ currently play at tournaments organised by the IMHA, this could be managed quite successfully without any reduction in the authority of the respective Masters organisations.
- ii. The organisation of 3 different World Cups in 3 different locations would entail more administration than at present.
- iii. Some of the benefits of economy of scale might be lost through holding 3 smaller tournaments.
- iv. These 3 smaller tournaments might create the perception that they are not as important as the present 'big' tournament organisation, although the 2015 Euro Hockey Masters in three different locations may provide some useful insight in this regard.

## **2. Qualifying Tournaments for a World Cup**

Existing tournaments could be used: e.g. 4 Nations and/or Continental Championships

New tournaments: e.g. Masters Champion's Trophy

**Pros:**

- i. This would reduce the number of teams in any World Cup enabling a wider range of nations to host them and reduce the pressure on the host facilities.
- ii. The length of a World Cup could be set to meet the needs of the different age groups as described in the rationale.
- iii. It could make participation in the qualifying tournaments more important and thereby ensure that they are well attended.
- iv. For teams eliminated at the qualification stage, a Plate World Cup could be organised so that all teams could play in a world cup at one level or another.
- v. The smaller World Cups could facilitate more tournament trophy matches to include players who can't play at international level for whatever reason.

**Cons:**

- i. Elite qualification tournaments could lead to 'lesser' countries never being able to play the 'big' teams from other continents with a possible loss of incentive for players in these countries to compete internationally and/or stay in the game.
- ii. Since the same players tend to move through the age bands together, there will be fewer opportunities for 'upsets' in results. The outcome of most competitions could be more predictable with a drop in excitement or interest for the 'lesser' nations and a consequent possible drop in future participation with related negative consequences for the Masters experience.
- iii. Similar possible negative impacts as outlined in the previous section relating to smaller tournaments.

## **3. Champions Trophy / Ranking Points Approach**

**Pros:**

- i. This is in line with the FIH approach and would ensure consistency across all international hockey.
- ii. It would allow the Masters associations to organise smaller tournaments and allow a wider range of countries to host the big tournaments.
- iii. It would match the elitist approach outlined in the section above.
- iv. A points system could be set up whereby teams earn points by participating in Masters' tournaments. If sufficient points are reached, entry to elite finals would be automatic.
- v. Plate competitions could be set up for those who do not qualify or earn sufficient points to provide an incentive for continued participation.
- vi. The smaller World Cups could facilitate more tournament trophy matches to include players who can't play at international level for whatever reason.

**Cons:**

- i. All the negatives outlined in section 2 above apply.

- ii. Wealthier countries would be able to earn more points than those from less well economically developed countries. These nations would be able to reach the elite finals through qualification tournaments, but how this might encourage new nations to become involved is unclear. It is not an equitable approach.

### **Conclusions:**

The integrity of the IMHA is in most danger if there is no re-structuring of future tournaments within the next 4 years, especially if the World Cup returned to Europe. The WGMA can continue to safely grow for up to 8 years if the Tournament Trophy was dropped from World Cups. However, given that the Tournament Trophy has been an integral aspect of WGMA tournaments since its inception, that would generate a strong counter reaction and so tournament sizes are likely to become an issue in around 5 years.

Given the need for an IMHA re-structure, the creation of such in isolation could create problems for the WGMA and the relationship between the two organisations. At the moment there are no significant differences in culture, given the harmonisation in regulations and approaches already in place, therefore player transition is straight forward. While divergence in tournament set-up could be viewed as a delightful change by some players, it could also generate negative attitudes and unsettle the leadership of the FIH since there would be less consistency of operation across the Masters' associations.

Logically, it would be more beneficial if structural changes were designed and agreed by both associations and that would be best achieved if the IMHA and WGMA were to become a single entity. To date the harmonisation in the operational approaches of the 2 associations has increasingly influenced the decision making of each other's Boards. Both Boards have recognised the benefits of improved liaison and ironically, this has highlighted the realisation that a unified Masters association could be the best way forward to ensure fair representation for all masters' players. It is possible that pressure for change within the WGMA may increase in line with its proportion of ex-IMHA players. Progressive unification would ensure that every member has a say and a degree of control over the future setup of a united Masters Association. The name of any future Masters Association is relatively unimportant, but a united Masters organisation will have more power and influence in determining its future and in attracting funding. IMHA players tend to be less exercised about names of organisations as long as they organise tournaments in line with their needs. The same is probably not true for WGMA players, especially those who were instrumental in setting up the senior organisation all these years ago.

### **Structure of a Unified Organisation:**

If a 3 Age Stage grouping was adopted it might make sense to have one over-all Board and 3 sub committees to run the different age stages as per their differing needs.

In a unified organisation there could be savings in human and economic resources through economies of scale and reduced duplication of effort.

**Glenn Paton**  
**President**  
**IMHA**  
**July 2015**