Hockey Mentors players and their journeys to England squads: a qualitative exploration

by Cathy Wardle

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Introduction

The Hockey Mentors (HM) mission centres around developing the potential of junior-performance hockey players from state-school and/or ethnic-minority backgrounds, who are considered to be at a comparative disadvantage in being able to reach England junior international squads through the England Hockey talent pathway. As this research will explore, talented players could see their progress limited by lack of opportunity to develop their hockey at school, less access to high-level play or less representation of their backgrounds in club, regional or national-level hockey. More implicit inequalities could also come into play, with players struggling to access the networks, guidance or knowledge needed to fully grasp selection procedures and navigate the talent system.

The imbalances across ethnicity and schooling noted by HM have been well documented in both grassroots and junior-performance hockey. Data on youth participation in hockey collected by Sport England as part of their Active Lives survey shows stark disparities when broken down by schooling or ethnic background. In the years 2017 to 2025, an average 22% of respondents from independent schools had played hockey in the last week, whilst the figures for academies and maintained schools averaged at 3%.[1] When filtered by ethnicity, the same data showed that in five out of the eight years surveyed the percentage of white British students having played hockey was higher than all other ethnic groups.[2]

The England Age Group Programme, which offers talented junior players the opportunity to play internationally for England in U16 and U18 squads, has likewise historically been

[1] Sport England, "Active Lives Children and Young People Survey", 2017-2025, https://activelives.sportengland.org/Result?queryId=108103.
[2] Sport England, "Active Lives Children and Young People Survey", 2017-2025, https://activelives.sportengland.org/Result?queryId=107480.

dominated by white private-school players. Analysing England squad data published by England Hockey, HM calculated that the proportion of players attending private school across the U16 and U18 England junior squads averaged around 73% in the last three cohorts (between 2023 and 2026), never dropping below 60% and in one squad reaching as high as 88%.[3] This was despite an average of only 6.4% of pupils in England attending independent schools in the same academic years.[4]

Through high-level competition, training and community building, HM seeks to address these imbalances at junior elite level. The organisation's mission is based around allowing its players to realise their aspirations within the performance pathway, notably by providing them with the closest experience possible to a junior international environment. This refers to the environment they would be part of if selected to play internationally for England as part of the England Age Group Programme.

Being selected for the England Age Group Programme represents the pinnacle of junior international hockey. Selection to its National Age Group squads (known as 'NAGS' or 'England' squads) opens doors to high-calibre training and international competition as well as providing a pathway towards senior international hockey and other opportunities like access to top universities. As a result, analysing the journeys of HM players who have successfully reached the England squads offers a key way of tangibly measuring HM's impact and its success in supporting talented junior players.

The following research sets out to do exactly this, unpicking nine interviews carried out in early 2026 with HM players who had reached the England U16 junior squads. It focuses around the central question of what role Hockey Mentors has played in helping state-school and/or ethnic-minority players reach England junior international squads, which historically have themselves been less representative of the players who HM seeks to support.

"What role has Hockey Mentors played in helping state school and/or ethnic minority players reach England junior international squads?"

The choice to focus on players in U16 squads can be explained by the fact that, in analysing the demographics of recent England squads, HM had noticed a strong retention rate in

[3] Raw data for these statistics can be found in squad announcements on the England Hockey news webpage: England Hockey, *News*, https://www.englandhockey.co.uk/media/news?category=england_national_teams&year=&competition=england_juniors.

[4] Office of National Statistics and Department for Education, "Schools, pupils and their characteristics", 2026, https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2025-26#dataBlock-6b1d268b-d266-4015-9489-2360d04a4b6a-tables.

terms of players from U16 squads who stayed on into U18 squads, varying from 71-86% across the three cohorts analysed (2023-2026). This underlined how little changes between U16 and U18 level in England, and thus the importance of helping players target the U16 squads as an entry point.

Basing the research around qualitative interviews allowed us to capture nuances of the players' experiences which might not have come across in surveys or other quantitative means of data collection, whilst also amplifying the voices of inspiring young people who have succeeded despite the odds seemingly being stacked against them. We focused on this broad, open-ended research question as it had the advantage of allowing us to explore players' journeys *throughout* their time at HM, rather than collecting narrower data on a certain aspect of their progression. Leaving the role played by HM undetermined also helped to avoid any unconscious bias or assumption that HM had been the *only* relevant factor in players reaching England. It allowed for rich, open discussion comparing and contrasting different hockey environments and experiences, as well as for the possibility of discovering areas where HM might develop its offering further.

Methodology

In designing the research, I defined a pragmatist research paradigm as the best lens through which to approach the study. This refers to a philosophical framework where the participants' experiences and realities are understood to be multiple, complex and ever-changing rather than single and fixed.[5] This fitted with the diverse experiences of the HM interviewees, as they were guaranteed to have varied backgrounds in terms of schooling, ethnicity, hockey experience and time spent at HM. Pragmatism considers the goal of the research to be real-world change and intervention, rather than simply revealing certain truths, which again aligned nicely with HM's active approach to enacting change in the landscape of state-school and ethnic-minority access to junior performance hockey. Finally, a pragmatist approach embraces working from a 'value-driven' point of view as a researcher, rather than trying to fully minimise one's personal values. In this case, it meant considering my own background as a state-school educated researcher not as a source of bias but as the spark that helped bring about my collaboration with HM, whilst also meaning I could empathise with the interviewees and therefore potentially uncover deeper insights.

Since this research works from a value-driven point of view, it is also worth highlighting for clarity that this research took the form of paid remote, freelance work undertaken over the course of eight months, in consultation with HM founder Jack Childs. This could create a

[5] See in particular Lynette Pretorius, "Demystifying Research Paradigms: Navigating Ontology, Epistemology, and Axiology in Research", *The Qualitative Report* 29, no. 10 (2024): 2698-2715. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2024.7632

level of subconscious impetus to paint HM in a positive light, but was a decision taken consciously to ensure comparatively *less* bias than if the research had been produced by someone involved with HM on a longer-term or full-time basis. The interviewees could also be seen as having a level of bias since they commented in the knowledge that the interviews would form part of research produced on behalf of HM. Nevertheless, having reached England squads already, the interviewees had essentially graduated from HM at this point so had little to gain from being excessively positive. Each interview also began with reassurance that there were no right or wrong answers, and that the recordings would not be retained.

A pragmatist research approach involves using research methods flexibly based on what best fits the question at hand. In this case, we chose to use semi-structured depth interviews, interviewing players individually for 20 – 60 minutes over Zoom in order to create a comfortable, private forum for detailed, in-depth discussion where there was no chance of being influenced by other respondents. By using semi-structured interviews, we could structure the conversation around pre-defined questions but also allow for a level of divergence to ensure we teased out precise areas of impact on the players' pathways to England.[6]

Eleven players were invited to interview in January 2026. This selection ensured roughly equal participation across genders and representation of a range of school experiences and ethnic backgrounds, so that the diverse realities of HM players were accounted for. From January to March 2026 I interviewed nine HM players – five girls and four boys. At a glance this may seem a small sample, however it accounted for a relatively high proportion of HM players currently in England U16 squads, at around 40%, plus two former England U16 players. We also made the decision not to seek further participants after nine interviews as the freelance nature of the research limited the time available, and we had also reached a 'saturation point' where new insights were not appearing across the interviews.

Eight of the nine players were at state schools at the time of interview and two were from ethnic minority backgrounds. Their time involved in HM varied in length, with four having joined four years ago when HM was starting out, but another having joined as recently as in the last year. Their pathways to the England squads also varied, though the Talent Academy Cup route stood out as most popular (six players compared to three selected via Open Assessment).[7]

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[6] See Sport England, *Sport England: Guide to Research* (2016), 33, https://www.sportengland.org/research-and-data/research.

[7] In the England Talent Development system there are two main pathways into the England U16 and U18 junior squads. The main pathway is through the Talent Academy Festival, where the 24 Talent Academy teams (regional teams) from around England compete at a tournament in front of England Hockey coaches

Each of the interviews followed the same broad scheme, broken down into three topics:

- The player's background in hockey;
- Their experiences with regards to coaching, connections and competitions at HM and in other hockey environments;
- Their perceptions of state-school and ethnic-minority access to hockey.

Across the interviews was the underlying thread of how these experiences had shaped – for better or worse – their journeys to reaching the England squads.

The interview audio was recorded, allowing the interviews to be transcribed and then closely proofread. Consent was sought for this recording and the data was stored on a secure platform and for as little time as was required for it to be analysed. I used the qualitative research methodology of thematic analysis to analyse the data, coding it through assigning keywords to pinpoint the gist of each response. I grouped this coded data first into larger themes and later into smaller sub themes, ordering it so as to group together agreement or divergence in opinion that could be interrogated. Following this approach, the key findings below will be presented thematically, homing in on the six broad areas where HM appeared to have played a role in the players' England journeys. These can be summarised as follows:

- Efforts to help players specifically target England;
- Exposure to high-level hockey which helped players to raise their level;
- Support from HM's expert coaching team;
- The priming of players' minds off pitch;
- Social connections forged amongst players;
- How HM connected players to other high-level hockey environments.

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and scouts. Alongside this, there is also a complementary Open Trials route, where players can attend two Open Trial days run by England Hockey coaches and scouts.

Key Findings

Theme 1: England-Focused Approach

HM's mission statement touches specifically on providing a simulation of the junior-international hockey experience, and it became clear across the interviews that in practice too this goal was built into the HM offering. In particular, the Junior International (JI) Programme organised by HM was framed as preparing the players specifically for England environments, and players were encouraged more widely to aim high and target England.

The JI Programme was repeatedly pointed to as a tailored approach to developing aspirational players,with interviewees making a distinction between the High Performance Programme (HPP) as somewhere to 'develop my basics and my skills to a high level' and the JI camps which 'take that and place it into a sort of junior-international setting with all really good players around you [...], to prepare you for trials and assessments'. Connections were drawn specifically between the JI Programme and the England trials, with players explaining:

- 'It was meant to prep you for any NAGS trials that you have.'
- 'It's developing the players who would really like to see themselves in an England setting.'

In pinpointing exactly how the JI Programme had helped them prepare, players stressed how the coaching particularly had primed them for England trials. One player noted that the experienced coaches involved had previously coached National Age Group squads and at senior level: 'Quite a lot of the content that they coach is based off what you would probably want to be good at when you go to a trial.' The coaching they offered was thus tailored to succeeding in these environments. Another player pointed to an emphasis on building and testing general fitness, and how this prepared them for fitness tests in England:

> 'In England we have these different tests that we have to do. So like 16 pitch lengths, stuff like that. And before these trials that we have to do for England, Hockey Mentors does prime you up for that. They test you, they make you do fitness, everything. They make sure you're up for that challenge.'

HM thus looked ahead to England trials and integrated the abilities that successful players would need into their coaching.

Players nevertheless also focused much of their comments on the off-pitch elements of the JI Programme that supported 'you as a person instead of you the hockey player', helping them to develop holistically. They highlighted the online strand of the JI Programme which could involve Q&As with international players and video calls covering topics such as resilience, nutrition, tactics and strength and conditioning, helping 'to give that edge slightly' with England trials in sight. On two occasions, players noted that these calls were recorded: 'they also helped when you couldn't physically go to training, but you still had the information to do it yourself.' The players appreciated the flexibility this afforded, allowing them to engage remotely at times that suited them best.

In several conversations an emphasis was also placed on the JI Programme's video analysis sessions and their power to improve technical and tactical understanding. One player described:

> 'Quite often in the JI Programme we'll have an off pitch where we'll study some international games and pick up on techniques, tactics, things like that. [...] It's really useful to see all the things that we're trying to implement in the training camp in an actual international match.'

It was stressed as an approach unique to HM which players might not have encountered if aiming for England solely from a Talent Academy (TA) or club, and one that could transfer well onto the pitch: 'When I get on the pitch, I can visualise myself doing it.'

As well as helping players to develop their fitness, strength, fuelling and tactical understanding in advance of England trials, players were prepared for the intensity of an England environment. When asked to compare HM and England squads, some estimated that England environments tended to be slightly more intense, since it was difficult to bring together enough players of England standard at HM, however others saw the two environments as relatively well matched with regards to intensity and the level of other players:

- 'You go to Mentors and the standards are the same and you get to feel the same intensity.'

- 'It's hard to replicate such a thing [as England] but there are similarities and I think they've done well with replicating as much as you can.'

Though there was some divergence in opinion on how much HM could necessarily replicate an England environment, what the players did converge on was how the JI Programme could allow them to experience a somewhat similar environment to England in advance of trials, thus serving as a 'stepping stone into the environment'.

More broadly, there was a sense that even before the Junior International Programme was brought into conversation, HM encouraged ambition in its new players. Players reported

being encouraged to set the NAG squads as a goal early on, so that their time at HM was focused around building towards England:

- ‘Hockey Mentors [...] has set that almost as my goal from the start’.
- ‘I actually don't know whether I would have gone for England Under 16s when I did if I didn't have Hockey Mentors [...]. They encourage you to put yourself forward for England trials’.

As well as providing encouragement, HM provided crucial education about the trialling process, demystifying it so that players were in a position to trial in the first place - one admitted that they ‘just didn't know about it in the same way’ until they were introduced to the concept of England at HM.

This tailored, England-focused approach continued once trials were secured, with players supported through a specific prep day which rehearsed what was expected at trial:

> ‘I remember in the summer we had the guys from Mentors who got a trial. They all went to a day where [a coach] sort of just walked you through what they want and did a couple drills with you.’

This support was psychological as well as technical, with coaches offering honest expectations to help the players anticipate potential outcomes (‘how well I could go, how far I could go’). One player added how it had also helped psychologically to come together with other HM players trialling in advance of the trials: ‘It helped that I could relate to someone that was in the same position.’

In sum, HM was described across the interviews as following a focused approach which put aiming for England squads at the forefront of players’ minds, whilst also furnishing them with the skills to be successful in this goal. This ranged from fine-tuning their technical skills and tactics through Junior International camps to working on the wider aspects of their development through online sports nutrition and sports performance education. Alongside these more practical elements, HM instilled the belief and ambition of reaching England from the start of the players’ journeys, whilst also providing them with key understanding of the trialling process and what would be expected of them.

Theme 2: High-Level Hockey

HM describes itself as developing talent through ‘the three Cs’ of coaching, connections and competitions, and a similar delineation of these three ideas came across when discussing the players’ England journeys. When discussing competition opportunities, it became clear that HM had provided players with valuable exposure to high-level hockey,

most notably through its domestic competitions programme and international tours, although also via exposure to high-level play *within* the HM community itself.

The majority of interviewees spoke of a lack of access to high-level hockey outside of HM, whether due to their schooling ('They don't really play high levels of hockey') or else due to living in parts of the country where there was less hockey provision and a scarcity of Talent Academies: 'There's kind of less hockey in the north than there is in the south.' Across the board, players estimated that private-school peers would have more opportunity for 'improving their skills', pointing to various advantages such as gym facilities, strength and conditioning provision, specialised one-on-one coaching and 'the opportunity to have hockey pretty much every day'. Others revealed the important disparity in match time, noting that private schools 'enter [...] more competitions' and are more likely to get to test themselves against other England players at training or inter-school matches.

Players spoke of HM as having helped to bridge this advantage gap so that they were on par with private-school peers for experiences like England trials. The players were exposed to a high level of play *within* HM due to the high concentration of talent within the programme,and had opportunities to play or train alongside these experienced players. In several cases they spoke of what they called 'playing up':

- '[Jack] gave me lots of opportunities to compete with people older than me.'
- 'Last year I was playing as a year nine in the Under 16 group.'

Players could incorporate the skills they saw in older players into their own hockey, and the same was true in terms of gender, with two girls mentioning having had the rare experience of playing in boys' tournaments. For one this was useful as 'we can learn from them. [...] Not a lot of teams do this, but I think it helps a lot.' The second player echoed the uniqueness of this opportunity, deeming it 'a really cool experience that I don't think I would have got if I went to a private school'.

The size and diversity of HM's player cohort was also framed by interviewees as providing valuable exposure to different playing styles. Whereas other hockey environments were made up of a more stable core of players, the makeup of the HM team could vary across tournaments:

> 'At club and TA and school you're always playing with the same players or thereabouts [...]. Whereas with Hockey Mentors, there's so many more people. So whenever I go to a match, I'm always playing with different people. And I think that's really good because then when I get to England and stuff, I'm not going to be like, "Oh, so they're not playing exactly how my right forward at club would play."'

Encountering a range of teammates boosted players' versatility and allowed them to react more easily to change in high-pressure scenarios like England trials or squads.

As well as preparing players to anticipate the unknown at England trials, the high calibre of the HM cohort allowed players to measure themselves against what was needed to reach England level, as they were often engaging with existing England players or England hopefuls at HM:

- ‘I play with other England people [...], it's really good because then I can almost look at the standard that I want to be at and then play with [them] and almost try and match [them].’

- ‘[HM coaches are] quite good at introducing people to each other and [saying] “Look what this person is doing” and “I really want to see that from you”.’

As these testimonies show, HM had cultivated a talented body of players who could be actively put into dialogue with newer aspiring talents. It is worth recognising that this gave the players the contact with other England players that private-school peers could access more easily. HM thus addressed a key element of the advantage gap between state and private schoolers. As one player put it, ‘we still get the same things that they would do.’

Alongside exposure to high-calibre hockey *within* HM, the interviewees commented on how they had raised their levels through competing *against* other talented players. When asked about memorable experiences within HM, it was often tournaments within the domestic or international competitions programmes that came up, ranging from the Reyes tournament in Barcelona and tournaments at Den Bosch in the Netherlands to tours closer to home in Ulster and at the University of Bristol.

Giving players access to tournaments in the first place was a significant step for some. One Northern player pointed out that ‘there wasn't always a junior match every weekend’ at home, and another commented, ‘I've played lots and lots of tournaments with Hockey Mentors, which I wouldn't have done with my old club’. HM was providing crucial pathways to competition not only for state-school and ethnic-minority players but, within that context, for those at larger clubs who could be overlooked for selection, and for those at smaller clubs in parts of the country with less hockey infrastructure or who might not enter tournaments. This provides some insight into the intersectionality of the disadvantages within junior hockey, where location and local infrastructure could be an additional source of inequality alongside differences in schooling or ethnicity.

The interviewees mentioned encountering high-level talent when playing against big-name clubs both in the UK and abroad, against private schools and against University teams. Clubs and schools like Wimbledon, Epsom College and Haileybury were seen as teams that they ‘wouldn't have played against’ at school/club, and which they could learn from due to the high-calibre play: ‘they really set the standard and you can be, sort of, taught by them in a way.’ One player reported that the challenge of playing against these top teams had helped to fuel their love for hockey, sparking a drive to keep raising their own level: ‘I

remember vividly the first five seconds they scored against me. [...] That's where I really saw myself growing in hockey.' Through competitions with HM, players were introduced to what high-level junior hockey could look like, with this serving as both a learning experience and a spark to want to reach the same level.

Players again underscored the benefit of encountering different playing styles during the international competitions they took part in with HM, with several recounting the eye-opening experience of watching how people from other countries play:

- 'My most recent thing is indoor hockey at Holland. That was amazing because you just see how differently they play and you can learn so much from it.'

- 'Playing styles are different and just generally it's nice to have exposure abroad.'

These international experiences were stressed as being unique to HM, with players remarking, 'I don't think many other organisations do that, going abroad' or else comparing it with the limited offering at hockey clubs which 'have just training every week and then possibly tournaments far away or in England'.

In several cases, correlations were drawn between these opportunities and the England squads, serving as preparation for the international tournaments that players would inevitably experience as part of the national teams:

> 'Playing loads of international teams, it's really helped me to have exposure to and get used to different styles of play. [...] That's helped me prepare for England camps and playing against different countries.'

Nevertheless, competition abroad with HM was not just about experiencing how other teams played. Players could also digest first-hand the more logistical elements of travelling and being away from home, which again they would re-encounter if they made the England squads. As one player put it, 'it gets you prepared, reassures you. Like, you've done it before and you can do it again.'

In sum, HM exposed its England hopefuls to high-calibre hockey in a variety of ways. Within HM they would play across age groups, genders and abilities, as part of a more diverse cohort than the teams encountered at club or school. Within this cohort were other England squad members, who served as blueprints which aspiring players could base their own hockey around. Looking outwards, the Competitions Programme organised by HM had a similar impact, with its domestic and international fixtures introducing players to diverse playing styles and boosting the versatility that they would need to react to the unexpected either at England trial or when later playing internationally again as part of England squads.

Theme 3: High-Level Coaching

As well as being exposed to high-level hockey on their journeys to England selection, players reported receiving high-quality coaching at HM, to such an extent that some favoured HM over other potential development opportunities' like private-school scholarships:

> 'The level of coaching that we actually have at Mentors is basically the same as what I'd get at private school, maybe even better.'

With this in mind, another key question to interrogate is exactly *how* HM coached aspiring players to such standards.

When asked about the standout features of HM coaching, players were repeatedly quick to list the accolades of their coaches:

- '[MH], I think he coached the Old Georgians, which is one of the best teams in England at the minute. [...] He won the Premier League a few times with Old Georgians. Don't take my word for it, but I think he brought on a nothing club to an everything club, really. And then [JR], [JR] is the ex-GB coach.'

- 'There's very experienced coaches there that have coached National Age Group squads and been involved in the senior programmes.'

Experience was something the players valued very highly in their coaches, and they especially valued access to coaches with a background working in senior hockey or a NAGS environment, since they shared knowledge of skills that would be valued in an England squad. The implication was that the players saw their coaches as a bank of information that they could tap into, in order to better understand hockey:

- 'Everything he says is so interesting and it just really makes me want to implement all the things he says in my own game.'

- 'It was my one opportunity to get this feedback, this coaching from people who really know what they're talking about and I think [...] one of the best things about Hockey Mentors is all the coaches just seem so professional, and they explain things really well.'

Players valued the clear and reliable information their experienced coaches could offer in helping them to understand the cornerstones of hockey.

In setting out the attributes of their coaches, players converged on another point: the value of a diverse range of coaching staff. They saw the mix of coaches involved in HM as

meaning that they could pick and choose from different advice and find the coaching approach that worked best for them. A repeated emphasis was placed on the different voices they could listen to: ‘There's so many different opinions.’ Their takeaway in multiple cases was the idea that they could sift through different advice until they found a style that suited their ways of learning:

> ‘They might teach you to do this, but then another coach might come along and tell you to do this. It's better to find a preference through that.’

Though this diversity was never perceived negatively, players did conceive differently of the value of consistency in coaching. One player was less keen on the status quo in a club environment where one coach ‘might follow you up throughout the age groups’, whereas another thought that this kind of consistency existed in HM too, and that the retention of coaches over the years could actually help in ‘developing relationships with the coaches’:

> ‘They support the players through everything such as starting from HPP camps, progressing to JI camps to getting my England trial. It's like they were with me through all of that.’

There was thus potential value in both the consistency and the breadth of the coaches involved in HM. They brought varying experience from working with top teams including the National Age Group squads themselves, and shared these insights over successive years, producing what some players experienced as a sense of support and follow through.

In discussing the actual delivery of coaching, players were also overwhelmingly positive in their assessment. They praised their coaches’ ability to spot and nurture talent, noting how coaches had singled them out and helped them develop towards specific goals like the England trials:

- ‘I remember the first camp I had with [MH], he picked me up immediately and thought, “Yeah, you're the guy.”’
- ‘Hockey Mentors, especially Jack, [was] like, “this is where I think that you could be,” and then “we're going to work you to there.”’

In the same vein, players emphasised the individual nature of coaching. They had access to one-on-one coaching and personalised feedback, both in the context of JI camps and also at specific preparation events for England trials, where players might be ‘[pulled] over’ and a coach would ‘explain what [they thought] I could do’. Off the pitch, too, players’ performance was analysed on a personal level: ‘We have all these one-to-one calls, not just group collective calls.’ In these one-on-one conversations, what was particularly valued was the honesty afforded in both directions. Coaches were realistic about players’ potential, helping to manage their expectations going into England trials so that they did not expect too much or too little of themselves: ‘I’d rather them be brutally honest than

say, “Oh, you're going to do well” and me going to the trial and getting cut first round.’ Vice versa, players could be honest about their concerns and uncertainties, asking ‘questions that we might not want to speak about when it comes to everyone else’:

> ‘We can always come up to the coach, speak to them, not get embarrassed because the coaches will always… they'll never make fun of you or anything.’

As an aside, this was another area where HM brought its predominantly state-school players on par with private schools. One player who had spent some time at private school confirmed that similar one-on-ones would happen there (‘I would have two one-to-one sessions at lunchtime with the school coach’), whereas a state-educated player conversely called HM ‘probably the only place where I get personalised coaching’.

Finally, players brought attention to the holistic approach to the coaching at HM, where time spent off the pitch was valued as much as what happened on pitch. Players studied tactics and were educated on ‘that next level of how to play, where to be, what you want to do in that scenario’. In particular, they studied tactics for penalty corner attack (PCA) and defence (PCD) and two-on-ones, with one player enthusing on the comprehension that could dawn from going over such concepts off pitch: ‘you just understand what you're doing, they really go into the cracks of how you're meant to play’. This newfound understanding was also credited directly with raising the players’ standards:

> ‘You just get all this information where it’s just like, “Oh my God, wow, this is what I'm meant to be doing. Okay, I understand it now, I understand it.” And that just pushes you to that next level.’

The HM approach to coaching was also holistic in the sense that it built players’ mindsets as well as fine-tuning physical and technical ability. The question of confidence came up in several of the interviews, with players musing that through being stretched in training they had come to better appreciate their abilities (‘Now I know what I'm sort of capable of’). In more than one case this had led to heightened confidence either on or off the pitch:

> ‘The coaching, that's helped me massively. Like it helped me be more confident, […] confident in what I do on the pitch.’

Interestingly, the individualised approach to coaching fed into forging players’ mentalities too, with one-on-one conversations allowing players to openly broach mindset:

> ‘I think that having one-on-one chats where you can be a bit more open […] made me sort of understand some of my feelings a bit better, because if on the pitch I'm getting frustrated, Jack or another coach can be like, “Why are you getting frustrated?” and then they can make me understand why I'm getting frustrated as well as help me make sure that it doesn't overwhelm me to affect my play.’

To conclude, HM had built a broad body of knowledgeable, experienced coaches with backgrounds in senior and National Age Group hockey. They could spot and nurture talent, guiding and priming players for England trial, and also engaged with players on an individual level both on and off pitch. This covered the more tactical elements of their hockey but also involved helping nurture confidence and emotional intelligence.

Theme 4: Priming Minds

Across the interviews, players repeatedly returned to the topic of mindset, enthusing that HM 'actually care about you as a person' and would prime their minds for England trials and other high-pressure scenarios.

They spoke of a general culture of positivity and self-belief, where players were encouraged to have faith in their on-pitch abilities. Being positive was 'emphasised a lot in Hockey Mentors' and could make players feel they were 'the best at what they do'. This culture also lowered the pressure felt by players, particularly in comparison to the high-stakes atmosphere of England. Players deemed it 'an opportunity to do better, instead of worrying about deselection or being dropped' and somewhere they could experiment in advance of England scenarios:

> 'I feel like I can be more creative in Hockey Mentors and then from that feel more confident when I get to England.'

Though players mentioned mindset being covered in off-pitch sessions, this confidence was also built indirectly through leadership opportunities like captaincy. One player noted that captaining a team had helped them to feel more confident in their assessments of on-pitch situations, providing confirmation that their 'advice was good'. They added that this gave them more belief in their own game: 'it's just made me more confident in what I'm doing too'.

In match scenarios, players spoke of working on 'mental priming [in the] days before a game', with HM having instilled a mentality of '[going] in with that full-force confidence' and optimistic mantras of 'I'm not going to let anyone get past me. I'm going to score'. Players credited this mentality with helping them beat the tendency of pre-game nerves, allowing them to 'shift [their] brain from more of a nervous mindset into more of an excited, thriving mindset'.

Other players addressed how this culture of self-belief could be carried over specifically into the England trials, providing them the confidence to get their opinions across and 'talk in bigger environments'. Another similarly saw the JI camp sessions on mindset as having given them 'tips of what to do in that kind of pressured environment, and how to stay calm'.

HM thus built confident, focused athletes who could manage nerves and also be assertive in daunting, new scenarios like England trials.

Though players were encouraged to have positive, confident mindsets, this was not without recognising the potential for setbacks to occur. Players were primed to withstand the disappointments that could occur when aiming for something as high stakes as England, such as injuries and deselection. Two players who had not made the England squads on their first attempts spoke of how deselection 'knocks your confidence a little bit', but how HM had nevertheless 'really helped with the mental side of it', specifically through encouraging them to 'continue through it, get better' so that they were 'much more ready' by the next time the trials came around.

Even when players had successfully made the England squads, HM coaches were on hand to support when they had setbacks, like not being selected for certain tournaments with the England squads. As one player described, '[a coach] spoke to me after that and he helped me understand what it was that I needed to do to be able to bounce back'. This gives a sense that HM remained invested in its players once they had reached England and could help them to work logically through difficult scenarios rather than catastrophising. Interviewees across the board spoke to this strong culture of resilience, with one player summarising: 'Hockey Mentors really has this thing where you just don't give up, you just keep going no matter what.'

HM thus primed players mentally for the challenges that lay ahead, fostering positivity and offering leadership opportunities which helped them to believe in their abilities and opinions. This was crucial for inspiring the confidence to advocate for their beliefs in daunting scenarios with lots of new people, with the England trials being a key example. In tandem, players were surrounded with support in setbacks and instilled with the drive and logical thinking to come back from losses, injuries and deselection, each of which could happen in the course of trialling and later playing for England.

Theme 5: Social Connections

The HM environment was clearly built strongly around supporting its players in a psychological sense, and it was similarly viewed as a supportive environment on more of a social level. Players highlighted HM as somewhere where people with similar backgrounds and interests came together and bonded, in a way that contrasted with other hockey environments and made experiences like the England trials and squads less daunting.

Often highlighted was the fact that there were environments in the players' hockey journeys where they could feel under-represented or struggle to socialise, due to a lack of

ethnic representation; their state-school peers' comparative lack of knowledge of hockey; or private-school dominance.

Speaking to ethnic-minority players revealed the disparities in ethnic representation across junior performance hockey. One player estimated there were 'a few others' when asked about numbers of ethnic-minority players in the England squads. Though quick to stress that in practice people had only judged them on their hockey and not their ethnicity, the player noted that they had found the representation of minority groups worse still in another national-level hockey initiative, where 'there was a profound difference' with 'everyone except from two people' being white British.

Additionally, peers at state schools would not always fully understand the players' hockey, since the sport was either not popular or not played at their school. Several interviewees underlined that their friends would still be very supportive, but seven of the eight state-school interviewees nonetheless noted that there was either a lack of interest around hockey at their schools or that peers had little grasp of the demands and sacrifices needed to play at England level:

- 'I don't really have the same interest as others because they don't really do much hockey. So what I think and what I'd like to talk about, they wouldn't really understand.'

- 'They don't understand like, I don't know, they might have a party on a Friday, [...] but you might not go to parties on a Friday night because you've got a game on a Saturday.'

When state-school players *did* engage in hockey outside of school, it could again set them apart to come from a state-school background. In two cases, players attended hockey clubs in areas that had top private schools nearby and the clubs were therefore dominated by private-school players. They noted their difference from their peers ('I'm literally the only state-school kid') and how difficult it could be to integrate socially:

> 'It's a huge private-school kind of cohort. So a lot of the time you find, I think maybe it's more so [at a] younger age, [...] but you find those natural groups of school friends.'

One related this exclusion to private-school players having shared successes and setbacks in their school hockey, with this topic dominating conversations:

> 'Sometimes you're not included in conversations and things, like the game they might have just had on a Thursday evening or something. Or, if they've lost, you're not really in it.'

Another pointed out that not only did private-school players get to know fellow hockey players from their *own* schools, but that they also built connections with players from *other* private schools through inter-school competition: ‘People know each other through having played school matches against each other, which [...] I obviously don't have because my school doesn't play hockey.’ This dynamic came into play in the context of England trials and squads too, with players lamenting their disadvantage in not knowing those from the dominant private-school cohort in advance:

- ‘There wasn't a lot of us who were from a state school in the England squad. So, it already does feel like you are an outsider because they all know each other and they all play against each other for school.’

- ‘A lot of the guys there, especially at trial and stuff, you see talking to each other. They're not from the same school, but they'll play each other in school matches.’

Across the interviews, players thus painted a picture of private-school hockey as a strong but potentially socially exclusive community, which could allow private-school students to make connections in advance of attending England trials, giving them the comparative advantage of familiarity in a daunting, high-stakes environment.

HM nevertheless stood out as a counterpoint to the potentially alienating experiences of being state-school and/or ethnic-minority hockey players within white-British, private-school dominated contexts. The interviewees were quick to praise HM for fostering an environment where they could feel at ease and build hockey-based friendships without feeling like outsiders.

They highlighted the general positive environment fostered at HM, with one player enthusing: ‘everyone's really supportive of each other and really inclusive, which is one of the things that made me love it so much’. On a more peer-to-peer level, the players saw this culture as helping them build strong, long-lasting friendships:

- ‘I think through Mentors I've probably made some of my closest friends’.

- ‘You can meet so many different people. Because of Hockey Mentors I know so many different people with such amazing personalities.’

Often they related this to the way that HM had put them in contact with other like-minded people, with one player explaining, ‘you kind of all have the same mindset. When you come together and you play together, it's like you connect instantly’. International tours were a particular environment where friendships could be cemented as a result of spending large

amounts of time together and competing with the same goal in mind: ‘Straight away you can connect because you're all sort of experiencing the same things’. As well as sharing a common interest in hockey, several players stressed the camaraderie built through sharing backgrounds with their HM peers. Players touched on the recognition felt through finding peers in similar situations:

> 'We're all just so similar with each other and we all have a sense of belonging [...]. Hockey Mentors, it's like another home for all of us where we just feel like, "Oh yeah, that person's like me.”’

Players explicitly suggested that this community built through HM could rival that of their private-school peers: ‘[private-school] people know each other through having played school matches against each other [...]. I guess knowing people through Mentors as well is quite similar.’ Another went as far as to suggest, ‘it's almost like we go to school together anyway.’

Players also remarked on how these connections from HM actually helped to replicate the private-school player experience of recognising each other across tournaments:

- 'When you go to competitions either against other schools or tournaments [...], you instantly see each other.’
- ‘It’s just like everyone knows everyone.’

This reassurance at finding familiar faces extended to England contexts, with the players often crediting the friendships developed at HM as making England trials less daunting, since they were approaching the experience surrounded by peers. One player put simply how the trial experience could otherwise have been: ‘I’d hate it if I went to a trial and I knew no-one'. Another confirmed that ‘Mentors didn’t go unknown, unheard at the trial’, adding that this had provided a ‘sense of community’ for trialling HM players. A further player went as far as to suggest that this had lessened the pressure of the experience:

> ‘Usually if you go to a new environment, you're sort of reluctant to go. [...] “Do I know these people? How am I going to fit in with them? How long is it going to take me to get to know them?”. But having that support of the reassurance that I know everyone who's going, [...] it takes a bit of pressure off.’

HM friendships again fed into players’ experiences of the England squads themselves. Players noted the comfort in having lots of HM friends in the squads:

> ‘I do tend to gravitate towards the people I know from Hockey Mentors because it's a really comfortable environment for me.’

Another stressed how being surrounded by other successful HM players from similar backgrounds helped to positively reinforce their belief that they did belong in the squad: 'You just feel that, "Yeah, I do deserve to be here."' Friendships cultivated at HM thus clearly extended as far as the England squads and, as with the England trials, made this high-pressure environment more manageable. As another player summarised, HM players in England were 'like a little family, really'.

In sum, the culture at HM fostered a supportive, nurturing environment where players could easily form friendships by virtue of their shared purposes and backgrounds. The bonds between HM players fed into their experiences at the England trials, where the strong contingent from HM meant players were put at ease in what was otherwise an environment dominated by white-British and private-school players. This reassurance again played into their experiences *within* the England squads, where strong representation from HM helped players to consolidate their belief that they belonged within this environment.

Theme 6: Hockey Connections

Having touched on *social* connections in the sense of the friends made at HM, it is finally worth surveying how HM also pathed the way to other kinds of networking, providing access to other hockey environments that could be crucial in players reaching England and developing their hockey further.

Two players credited HM with having put them on the radar of private schools. One in particular enthused about HM's role in helping them make these connections:

> '[Jack] gave me so many different opportunities, with [...] different schools, even. [...] These schools know me because of hockey. It's because of Hockey Mentors that I've been able to be known.'

The benefits of private-school hockey have already been stressed over the course of this study but can be summarised as offering players more personalised coaching, more time spent on pitch and the integration of hockey into the school day rather than a schedule heavy on evening training.[8] It could also expose players to high-level play through

[8] Though the strong integration of hockey into independent-school sport was often put down to funding and facilities by players interviewed, it is also worth adding that private schools also have the unique ability to focus on a smaller core of sports as they are not tied to following the national PE curriculum.

competition and training alongside teams full of other young talents. Some of the state-school interviewees thus imagined private school as a potentially easier or, in any case, different pathway to England, with one summarising that 'the opportunities are so different from state school to private school, especially in sport.' Players having won such scholarships concurred on their luck. They marvelled at how HM had 'really [opened] these different doors', pathing access to a lifestyle that put hockey training at the centre of daily life:

- 'When you play at a private school, you have more opportunity to have hockey pretty much every day.'

- 'I could go from my lesson and just walk to the hockey pitch, which is not something I think anyone who doesn't go to that kind of school could do.'

Players were also put into conversation with top hockey clubs. HM was described as a platform through which players could get their names on the radar of these organisations:

> 'I was in quite a small club, which not many people know about, but because of Hockey Mentors, my name has gone out across England. [...] I've made so many connections with different, massive clubs who've asked me to play for them.'

With HM itself being more match based than training based, introducing players to good clubs ensured they received regular high-level coaching as a complement to the work they did at HM during weekends and holidays. In one case a player was recommended a club where a HM coach was also involved, meaning they could continue their work with the same coach, receive HM-level training on a regular basis and develop a strong coaching relationship. The player credited this connection with their England success, having received 'one-on-one sessions' focused on refining their technical abilities. They summarised it as 'a good relationship to get through Mentors'.

Connections made at HM could finally be pivotal in players' future prospects. Two players specifically highlighted HM tours which took place at universities, noting that staying in university accommodation and training with a university team had been useful since the players were at an age where they were 'starting to move towards university life'. Players hoped that their hockey experience might 'put [them] above many other competitors for those different really high-level universities'. Others similarly regarded their HM and England squad experiences through the lens of what they might unlock next, with eight of the nine interviewees expressing an explicit wish to continue playing going forward, with

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See Elizabeth Conway, "Will hockey in England always be an 'independent school' sport?", *The Hockey Paper*, 6th April 2023. https://www.thehockeypaper.co.uk/articles/2023/04/06/will-hockey-in-england-always-be-an-independent-school-sport.

HM experiences playing abroad sparking a desire to play internationally at senior level and ‘continue being in the England programme’.

To conclude, playing for HM allowed players to get on the radars of other top hockey institutions. Through these connections they could continue receiving the high-level coaching and play that they enjoyed at HM throughout the year, rather than just during holidays and weekends. Nevertheless HM was, as one player put it, ‘pivotal in [their] development, not only in the short term with the NAGS.’ Experiences competing with HM inspired in players the ambition to aim for top universities and to remain in the England programme going forward.

Conclusions

Across the board, HM brought out potential in state-school and ethnic-minority players that might not otherwise have been harnessed, given their reduced access to elite hockey pathways. HM coaches spotted this untapped talent and helped shape it with ambitious goals like the England Age Group squads in mind, through the broad programme of opportunities offered at HM.

The JI Programme offered a taster of what players might experience in England in terms of intensity, level of play and also the focus on off-pitch elements like team bonding, fitness and mindset. This England-focused approach continued beyond the JI Programme itself, with prep days set up specifically so that coaches could help trialists anticipate how the trials would be.

To offer this high level of play to its England hopefuls, HM cultivated a talented and diverse body of players who newer additions could learn from, playing across genders, ages and abilities as well as against existing England squad members. Through the fixtures of the Competitions Programme HM again exposed players to high-level hockey, as they encountered different playing styles both domestically and internationally. This served to set them up for the unexpected at England trials, and indeed for the logistics of international travel if they later competed abroad for England.

HM coaches provided expert coaching on and off the pitch which developed players technically, tactically and more holistically. Their wealth of experience, including within the National Age Group environment itself, was valued by players, who felt inspired to put their advice into practice on the pitch. Nevertheless, HM coaching went beyond the pitch itself. In one-on-one discussions they could receive honest, personalised feedback, question their coaches on their doubts and unpick their emotions in a safe environment.

Indeed, HM was perceived as cultivating healthy relationships with emotions, instilling players with positivity and optimism as they took on challenges against top teams. As much as this was imparted through workshops on mindset, it was also nurtured through providing players with opportunities to lead, helping them to discover new-found confidence which would be crucial in settings like England trials where they needed to get their voices across. Players were also primed to deal with setbacks as they aimed for England, with an emphasis on resilience helping them to move past deselection from England and injuries.

The supportive culture at HM stretched beyond emotional support, with players also describing a nurturing environment where friendships were easily formed through the bringing together of players with a shared purpose and similar backgrounds in terms of schooling and ethnicity. This created a community of state-school hockey players that rivalled the community around private-school hockey, and meant that at tournaments across the country and most notably at England trials, players felt at ease and surrounded by familiarity. For those successfully making England squads, their HM friends remained a reassuring presence.

Connecting players to more than just new friends, HM finally opened doors to other hockey environments which helped make the difference as players prepared to trial for England. Put into contact with private schools and clubs, including ones where HM coaches were involved, players could benefit from regular high-level coaching in a way that HM itself could only provide during weekends and holidays, since players gathered from across the country for its opportunities.

The fact that such a broad range of factors contributed to the players' England success speaks highly of the multi-faceted nature of the HM programme, with the organisation seemingly finding success in its approach of developing players across a three-fold structure of connections, competitions and coaching. Indeed, the support given to the aspiring England talents can largely be summarised around the same three pillars. It developed players holistically through coaching and camps priming players for England, gave exposure to high-standard fixtures which built the versatility needed to succeed at trial and gave players valuable connections both with other talented players and with other high-level hockey environments where they could further develop with England trials in mind.

HM is thus establishing itself as a complimentary pathway to England's talent development system for those less able to access the conventional routes, whether this be related to geographical location, schooling, ethnicity or indeed a combination of such factors.

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