As a seasoned scout, I've spent countless hours evaluating players—carefully watching, noting, and interpreting their skills, gameplay, traits, tendencies, hockey intelligence, confidence, and body language.

These subjective type of observations are the norm when scout hockey. They are recorded using detailed, descriptively rich language and are then balanced with objective data and analytics. Together, the subjective and objective elements of the scouting hopefully work to build a comprehensive picture of a player's potential.

Descriptive statistics, the objective data used in scouting, attempt to quantify and predict future performance by supplementing just opinion. Opinion is full of bias and is notoriously invalid. So, a mixed method is always preferred. A mix of analysis using subjective indicators, expert opinion and knowledge and objective hard data or scores. By pairing data sets ranked and calibrated scores are possible and represent the most reliable and valid measures. Objective data is gathered from combines, anthropometric measurements, and physiological capacity tests. But, it may also be statistical values and analytical data sets.

All metrics help approximate a player's capabilities and when these values are compared to peers, normative datasets, and comparable sports a picture of capability emerges. Collectively, information like that obtained from comprehensive scouting methods help to describe what might be possible for a player.

Many times, demographic information and injury histories are also examined and weighted to supplement the above noted scores.

In professional and elite settings, these methods, and others, allow evaluators to review complete roster sets of eligible players by age, stage, level and other sortable variables. Scouts and hockey operations staff then sort athletes by tenure, eligibility, availability, and cost—often supplementing what was gathered with what is known using widely referenced online player databases.

These player data bases help answer key questions like:

> “Where are they now?”
>
> “How did they perform in that league?”
>
> “Did they thrive or merely survive?”

The result is often a *soup and salad* of information—varied, abundant, and sometimes overwhelming.

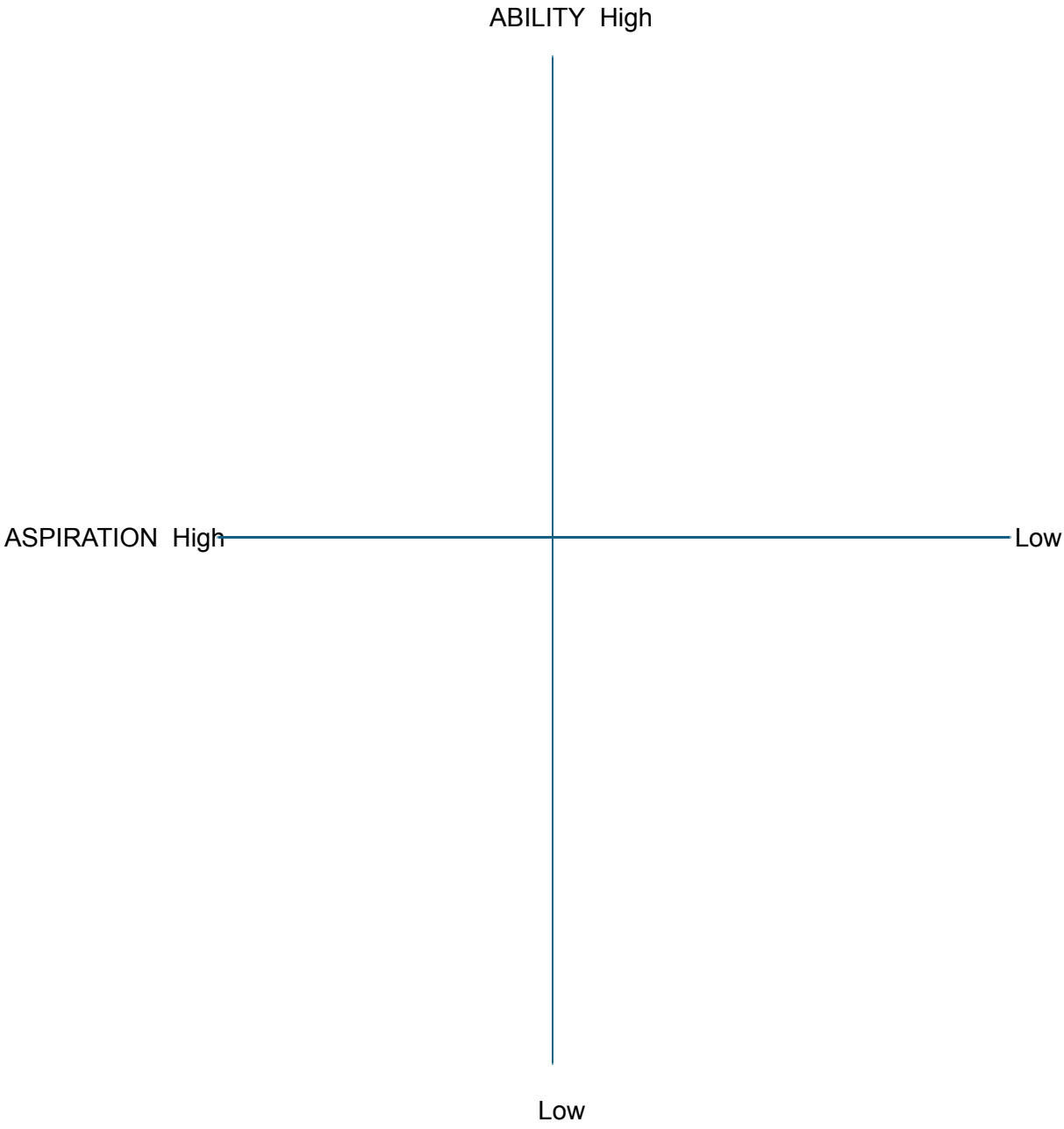
The ultimate goal of scouting is to provide a reliable and valid method of evaluating and comparing prospective players. In the best situations accurate player evaluations can also inform coaching (See Below). Further comparisons of players can also be valuable. Players may be compared to others based on criteria like position, line assignment/depth (first six, etc), team gaps, required roles, or overall fit to the club.

In amateur and minor leagues, however, teams often lack scouting experience and expertise. They often do not have the human or financial resources, or the time for pro scouting reports. Instead, informal networks of hockey contacts are typically leveraged to gather opinions about players. This approach is far less reliable and can be problematic. Careers have been derailed by a single poor or inaccurate report.

It is also easy to become lost in the volume of information that is gathered on players today. Data “noise,” outlier evaluations, and inconsistent reports often cloud judgments and decision making on players. For example, one scout may love a player; another may deliver a harsh assessment. Who is right? And then there’s the issue of sample size—have you truly seen enough of the player to know them? The honest answer is often *no*. Maybe on the particular night, the kid had a bad game!

So, what can we do to evaluate players as a coach, manager, recruiter for a small budget team?

Figure 1: Ability and Aspiration Matrix



A simple, cost-effective, and highly valuable method for evaluating players—one that helps level the playing field—is the use of a two-by-two table or matrix. In this method, a player's overall skill/ability is plotted on a grid and then cross-referenced with an added key qualifier. In my example a construct known as "*Aspiration"*. The result of using a 2x2 table or matrix is that it provides a clear

Ability/Aspiration rating, an instant depth understanding for the entire team and an easy-to-interpret visual representation of the player's value proposition.

In the Ability Aspiration Matrix example provided the tool can be used as a good guide for decisions on things like recruitment, selection, follow-up, promotion, and even development. Most importantly, at the amateur and minor levels, a tool like this can be used to inform coaches on targeted coaching interventions for the individual players. Unlike professional teams,development is the priority. Cutting kids should be a last resort.

The following table summarizes how coaches might respond to various placements within an Ability/Aspiration Player Matrix, highlighting ways to support weaknesses and maximize strengths.

4×4 Ability × Aspiration Matrix Potential Coach Actions

Aspiration \ Ability	Very Low Ability	Low Ability	High Ability	Very High Ability
Very High Aspiration	**Eager but Unready** — Channel energy into foundational training; assign a player-mentor from leadership group; set short-cycle goals.	**Motivated Learner** — Structured upskilling plan; stretch tasks with safety nets; frequent feedback.	**Ready & Driven** — Pipeline for advancement; high-impact roles and assignments; leadership grooming.	**Top Talent (Star)** — Accelerated growth plan; strategic assignments; retention target, focus and recognition regularly.
High Aspiration	**Willing Rookie** — Create a clear learning path; senior player-shadowing; assess fit periodically. Consider re-assignment for best development environment.	**Growth Trajectory** — Targeted development; expose to best possible training; create measurable milestones.	**Strong Performer** — Broaden their scope and assignment; encourage contribution and influence; succession planning.	**High Flyer** — Assign for pivotal roles like special teams; promote to higher leagues, competitions, events; protect from burnout.
Low Aspiration	**Misaligned/Uncertain** — Career conversation to explore interests; clarify role expectation and assignments; reduce pressure to advance.	**Capable but Unengaged** — Diagnose blocks to performance (workload, role fit); craft new roles for interest; recognize contributions.	**Steady Specialist** — Maintain ability and contributions; offer optional growth opportunities; leverage as leader if willing.	**Expert by Choice** — Deepen specialization; provide responsible autonomy; promote with balanced pressure/opportunities.
Very Low Aspiration	**At-Risk Fit** — Confirm role match; address obstacles; consider reassignment or support exit.	**Minimal Engagement** — Simplify scope; set clear baselines; monitor for contribution.	**Reliable but Plateaued** — Preserve performance; lighten nonessential demands; respect stability preference.	