

WITH PLAYOFFS ON OUR MIND, REMEMBER TO TAKE IT EASY ON THE REFEREES



We often forget that hockey is just a game. A game played by thousands of kids across Ontario. Playing the game they have grown up to love since they could strap on a pair of skates. They play the game with heart, passion, desire and most importantly, for fun.

But what happens when the most important attribute, fun, gets displaced by winning at all costs? Oftentimes, players, coaches and parents take our great game in the wrong direction. When the game on the ice gets too competitive and the intensity gets raised, the first people to feel the brunt of that excitement are usually the referees.

The 5,000 OMHA officials referee because they love the game of hockey and want to give back to the community that provided them with the opportunity to play the game they grew up loving when they were kids. There has been a trend in recent years that has seen a number of our younger officials not want to come back to the officiating program. Why? The answer is simple. These officials are seeing a side of the game that has no business in this great sport.

Whether it is Novice house league or Midget AAA, many officials feel they are being treated in a manner that is completely unacceptable. If we continue as a hockey community to head down this dangerous path, we will be left with many of our young, dreaming hockey players without a place to play as there will be no officials there to referee those games.

I may be a little over dramatic, but as a skating official I see it first-hand.

A lot of player or coach behavior in minor hockey can be attributed to what they see on Saturday nights. Do officials make mistakes? Absolutely. It is not the mistakes that define us as players, coaches or referees, but how we respond to these situations. At the end of the night the horn sounds and each and every one of us goes home to our families, forgetting about this game and looking ahead to the next.

Many situations could be easily avoided if we were to just stop and think about the impact of our actions and behaviour, especially when directed at young officials. Heat of the moment happens and we have all been in those situations. How we handle those situations will go a long way in retaining these young officials. We need these young officials, because they will, in time, be the veteran referees skating the big games.

Every year we see hundreds of new 14 and 15-year-old boys and girls attend OMHA Referee Schools and clinics. They come for a variety of reasons: to stay active, as a part time job to earn some spending money, or perhaps one day be the next Kevin Pollock, an OMHA grad

refereeing a Stanley Cup Final. They have smiles on their faces and are extremely excited to become officials. But something happens to these officials when they leave those schools and during the following year. Why aren't some of these young officials returning? We all know the answer. What 14-year-old wants to skate a 7:00 AM hockey game in the middle of winter and be screamed at because he missed a tripping penalty? Sound familiar?

We in the OMHA officiating program want to see ALL these officials back. We have put in place, through supervision, mentorship and continuing education and e-learning, ways that these officials can deal with and manage the conflict they encounter, along with improving themselves as officials. I know the same is being done through Respect in Sport education for parent and Bench Staff.

With playoffs on our mind, I urge all parties to remember to take it easy on the refs. Will there be non-calls, or calls that we did not agree with - I am almost sure of it. But what we all have to do is remember that our referees are an integral part of the game and before we yell and scream at them, take a deep breath and remember that it is just a game.