

This I Believe - Hockey is the Cure for what Ails America

By Joe Scatchell - 3/2/07

Failing test scores, ill-behaved day care children, gangs, drug use, the list goes on of the ills facing our country. We look for quick answers that many times end up creating new issues and the circle of problems grows wider in an ever-spiraling pattern. So how do we stop the momentum and hope to reverse its damage?

Play Hockey.

I know that most of you are calling up images of stick swinging, lights out punches and bench clearing brawls. You've been fed a lie. That those things occur is a fact. That they occur so rarely to have painted an entirely incorrect picture of the sport is also a fact. Thousands of games are played each week all around the world now and you can probably name 3 or 4 incidents of outlandish behavior, total.

Here's the truth. If you want society to be civil, its citizens polite, humble and respectful of one another get everyone involved in hockey. Hockey is above all else a family commitment that instills the values that our society holds dearest; that we are part of something bigger than ourselves, hard work has its reward, but most important, respect for others.

For the uninitiated, hockey starts at 6, both in age of player and time of morning practices! Moms and Dads, Grandmas and Grandpas, Aunts and Uncles load up the player and equipment and it's off to the rink. Many times the rides to and from the rink are lengthy giving parents and guardians and the children quality time to do the unusual; talk to one another. The conversations are not always deep or life altering but that they happen at all is becoming rarer. How did you sleep? Did you like that cereal? No, I never heard of "Take it Back Sunday", is it a song or a group?" It's all good because you are establishing lines of communication that may be used for much more important matters some day.

At the rink, you get to watch your child learn. The early progress is breathtaking. Remember how you marveled when they learned to walk? Use a fork? How many chances to you get to see something as wonderful? Try skating sometime to see how difficult it is for yourself. It's likely that in a short time, your child will be better at something than you are. Talk about a no lie dose of self-respect!

Teams often play in tournaments that take place over several days and far enough from home to require over night stays. Whole families attend these events providing yet another opportunity to do something that is vanishing from our American landscape; the family road trip. Again, conversation, whole discussions even, stops for meals and potty breaks, arguments over who is touching who and all the other things that those fortunate

enough to have taken these trips in our youth, still remember fondly many years later. Siblings look forward to hanging with all the other siblings, the hotel pool, knee hockey in the halls, and yes, the excitement of the games themselves.

Coaches are more than hockey fanatics; they are coaches of life. Players are correctly taught that hockey is a team sport. Everyone on the team contributes. Most teams keep playing time evenly distributed among the players in all but the most competitive situations to instill this fact. Parents are encouraged to bring school and home issues to the coach so that both the parents and the Coach are consistent. For example, it's not at all unusual for Johnny not to play if he isn't doing well in school or disobeying at home.

Hockey can be dangerous. Sharp blades, hard sticks and the speed of play demand that players maintain control and respect for themselves and their competitors. Players are taught to "play the body" and not go and "hurt 'em". Indeed, the intention of checking is to separate the puck from the player; take the puck not the player out.

The game's traditions reinforce the basic tenets of a civil society. Before each game, kids as young as 8 years old and already placed in leadership roles as Captains, introduce themselves to the opposing Coaches and Officials and shake their hands. The rules of the game support the development of leadership by allowing only the Captains, not the Coaches, to talk to the officials about game calls. When a player scores, all his teammates join in the celebration. The players who assisted on the goal get the same point the scorer received. Showboating does not occur in hockey. At the end of every game, all players and Coaches line up and shake hands. The same occurs at every level and even at the end of the NHL season.

Lest you think my arguments are specious, I offer these observations. Look at the other professional major American sports and compare them to professional hockey. Most of the players in the NHL and supporting professional leagues have lived away from their families and with host families at some point. Most of us would not think of taking a strange teenager into our home. If you speak to just about any host family, they will tell you that the kid came in with all of the attributes I speak of. They were polite, respectful, humble and thankful for the hospitality shown. Lifelong relationships were made. You don't see professional hockey players being named in bar room shootings or taking steroids or other illegal drugs. Listen to the player interviews. Universally, they deflect any praise to their teammates and coaches. If they have a bad game or they're in a slump, they talk about needing to work harder and blame only themselves. When they receive awards, they start by thanking their parents and talk about those long car rides to rinks early in the morning. They are humble, thankful.

These same things happen at every hockey banquet I've had the honor of attending. I was privileged to spend as much time as I did with my daughter and 2 sons and have been paid back many times over for those cold mornings when I see them working at something hard, being polite, humble and respectful.

Thank you hockey.