



ARTICLE OF THE MONTH

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Parents are killing kids' hockey

In light of Junta case, why can't we embrace the concept of letting our children play without adults around to mess things up, ALLAN MAKI asks

By ALLAN MAKI

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A message to all you minor-hockey moms and dads: Do your kids a favor. Put a stick in their hands, skates on their feet and tell them to go play on an outdoor rink. Just play. Tell them there won't be any parents dropping by to set the rules or talk to the coach. Tell them there won't be any coach. Tell them their coach was Ken Hitchcock and he just got fired. (They'll get it.)

Tell them not to worry about which kid is on what team and who's scoring all the goals. Tell them it doesn't matter because they're going out to play -- not to practice or win some tournament -- just to play.

Does anybody remember how to do that, how to tell their kids to have fun without signing all the registration forms, writing a dozen checks, then worrying about how much ice time Johnny's going to get if Mr. So-and-so is his coach again?

Today's parents just don't get it when it comes to letting kids play. Perhaps it's too deep a concept to understand because we adults are busy organizing every waking moment of our child's life. This is especially true in hockey, where the youth of today have practices, games, tournament games, summer hockey, hockey school, power-skating classes and agendas that would tire a Bay Street money manager.

It's the height of smotherhood and very much a reason why we have to read about Thomas Junta, the Massachusetts maniac who was sentenced yesterday to 10 years in jail for killing another parent at their kids' pickup practice game.

Junta said he was trying to protect his son because the other players were practicing too hard and being rough, so he killed the man. Wonderful logic, right? And had it been a one-in-a-million incident, most of us would have written off Junta's lethal blow-up as the act of a nut bar. But we can't, because it wasn't a singular act.

Three days ago in Buckingham, Que., a dad was arrested after he slammed his son's minor-hockey coach against a concrete wall then punched him in the head. It happened in the team's dressing room in front of four players' ages 11 and 12, one of whom was the coach's son.

The coach, who was accused of having something against his attacker's son, was quoted as saying: "One of [the boys] was crying. He was yelling: 'He punched you. He can't do that.' He was scared."

How come the kids know it's not right for a dad to punch a coach, but the dad seems to think he can do whatever he wants? Case in point: At a summer tournament game in Brandon last year, the coach of a U.S. team tossed the referee into the boards and grabbed him by the throat. The coach didn't like the way the ref was calling the game. The players involved were 13.

Sadly, we could list a dozen more examples of parents taking a nice idea like peewee hockey and rubbing it up against the glass. But rather than do that, why can't we embrace the concept of letting kids play without parents around to mess things up?

Robin Mann, the president of the Calgary Minor Hockey Association, likes that idea. He likes it so much he wants to follow the lead of several Ontario cities that have set up times for kids to drop by, even at their local recreation center, and play shinny.

"We're almost organizing shinny -- now there's a dichotomy, right?" Mann said. "We're going to say: 'you come out to the rink. You figure out teams and we'll have someone there just to make sure there are no brawls.' I think it will be interesting to see what kind of response it gets."

Gerry Pinder would also like to see more kids playing shinny, or even street hockey. Pinder used to play in the National Hockey League and was a member of the Canadian team that won a bronze medal at the 1968 Winter Olympics. He believes it's more than all right to let kids play without rules or supervision. It's good for their development.

"Parents don't understand there's a ton of skill to be learned just by playing around, handling the puck," Pinder said. "And I'll say this: I've never seen a game on an outdoor rink where the kids couldn't sort out their problems. You don't need an adult there saying, 'That kid slashed my kid.' "

The Canadian Hockey Association has a Safe and Fun program aimed at educating parents on how to behave on the minor-hockey scene. Easier still is the idea of telling our kids to go outside and play shinny with their pals -- for fun and nothing else.

You remember what fun was like, don't you?