



SPECIAL ARTICLE

WE STILL HAVEN'T LEARNED

Words about class from one who knows

by Joe Fitzgerald
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The only thing he wanted to talk about was Drew Bledsoe.

“He went way up in my eyes,” Bobby Orr said. “How often do you see something like that, where the number one guy gets hurt, then can't get his job back, yet there's no complaining, no sulking, no ‘Trade me,’ no nothing, just helping the kid who took his place. Tell me, when have you seen that before? Not too often, huh? Me neither. I give him all the credit in the world.”

“But that's not what I'm calling for,” Orr was told.

“I know . let me guess,” he said, feigning uncertainty, knowing precisely why the call was made.

Lost in the shuffle of last week's Super Bowl buildup was a small news item out of Toronto, telling of a brawl, involving parents and coaches that erupted when one coach assaulted another at the conclusion of a hot-tempered youth hockey game.

But belligerent adults have long been the scourge of youth sports with consequences that have even proved fatal, so a post-game confrontation hardly qualifies as big news.

What made this altercation noteworthy, wasn't the participants, but rather one of the spectators, the name above all names in hockey, Orr.

The Hall-of-Fame icon was standing in the crowd with one of the fathers, a friend, when the ugliness began.

“Oh, I saw it all,” he said. “One coach went after the other one, then it got real crazy real fast.”

Any level-headed person witnessing a scene like that would be repulsed, but for Orr, 53, it was especially grating because of the many years he has spent using his prominence to openly plea for civility and coolness when it comes to kids and sports.

“Nothing bothers me any more than the pressure we place on youngsters,” he once told a gathering of General Motors executives in Canada. “Let me make this clear, OK? If your youngster is involved in any athletic program where the stated emphasis is not on having fun, then get your youngster out of that program.”

“I have stacks of clippings at my house that tell of children being berated by an angry parent, humiliated by a frustrated coach; we're talking about serious hurts, damaging blows, very personal

wounds, all knowingly inflicted by adults who ought to know better but are too caught up in their own egos and their own needs to show the world that they're winners, too.

“We need to define for our children what winning really means. When you're 10 years old you need to know that if you tried your best and did everything you could, you are absolutely a winner.”

Those who've traveled with him have often heard Orr, when addressing young audiences, implore kids to disregard expensive brand names.

“I never had new skates until I was 12,” he told a gathering in West Roxbury. “The ones I wore were second-hand; my parents got them in exchanges. You don't need top-of-the-line equipment to have fun. And don't be asking your parents to buy \$30 sticks for pond hockey either; it's unnecessary, and unfair to them. You don't have to spend big money to do well in sports; you just have to love what you're doing.”

So there he was in Toronto when the fists started flying.

“Did you get into it?” he was asked.

“Not in the middle of it, no. But I did tell a few of the adults, ‘Get these kids out of here,’ because they were all milling around and I didn't want them getting into it, too.”

“What were the reactions of people who recognized you?”

“I wasn't paying attention to that. But what got me mad was the people in your business. I'll bet I got 48 calls from reporters, half of them acting as if it was the first time anything like this had ever happened. If they'd done a little checking they'd have found there were three other incidents there within 10 days of this one. So I wouldn't talk with any of them, other than to ask, ‘Is it a story just because I was involved? Would you have cared enough to cover it if I wasn't there?’ ”

“What did they say?”

“Nothing, but we know the answer,” he replied. “Each time we hear about another incident, I think maybe it'll be the one that brings us to our senses. We can see the lessons everywhere we look, but I'm afraid we've yet to learn them.”