



Our society places a high value on professionals. In sports and entertainment, being a professional is given a high rating among image builders. Yet, in minor (and professional) hockey, the only professionals are often scorned.

The Saskatchewan Hockey Association has stated that it loses almost 40% of its officials each year. What is alarming is that most of the turnover is due to officials getting sick and tired of receiving abuse from teams and parents. In other words, the officials have decided that it just isn't worth the money to have their self-esteem battered night after night.

Saskatchewan is no different from most other jurisdictions in Canada. Clearly, when it comes to hockey, approximately 10% of coaches, officials, managers and hockey players registered in any hockey association are officials. They are necessary for the games to take place. If we run out of referees, hockey will not be played.

The SHA states that it often invests four or five years of developing time for officials. During that time the official gains experience and rises through the ranks to arrive at the Pee Wee and Bantam levels where the situation gets extremely volatile. By then, many of them have had enough and quit.

Because of the high turnover rate among older referees, associations must make sure to encourage as many younger officials as possible to begin training. However, these young officials cannot be assigned to do games at the upper levels. Therefore, young people do not receive enough games to develop properly and they are often assigned to the difficult levels before they are ready. This leads to more problems and officials find other ways to spend their time.

League administrators are struggling to find the answer to keeping officials from quitting. Better training; mentoring of young officials; more effective supervision...all have been considered. The main problem with all of the suggestions - no time and not enough supervisors/mentors. The people who can and should be doing the supervising and mentoring are too busy being assigned to high level games which require their expertise.

Tougher penalties on coaches and players who abuse officials will help. Tough action taken against unruly parents will help. But these measures have been taken before and have proven only to achieve short-term results because the zero-tolerance policy is not maintained for very long.

What parents and hockey organizations are facing in the near future, is a drastic escalation of the rates which are paid to referees. If the "job" is becoming more difficult, it will require a much higher level of remuneration in order to make it worthwhile to do the work. Purists will state that referees should be doing this because they love of the game. Nevertheless, with the kind of pressure that is placed on officials today, it takes more than love to keep the jersey on.

Being a referee is truly a thankless job. No matter what you do, someone is not happy. Being a wife/child of a referee is a difficult position also.

My husband has been an on-ice official for many years and has been around hockey all his life. Myself, I was raised at the arena. I did not have the pleasure of playing organized hockey, but played pick up with the boys any chance I had, Through this, I learned a fair amount about the game and continue to learn. I make it a priority every year to read the manual of operations for OMHA and the Referee's case book, making myself familiar with the rules and operations of the game. I strongly suggest that any parent, fan or member of a coaching staff do the same.

Now, having said that, it amazes me how many parents/fans can sit in the stands, sipping their hot chocolate, constantly criticizing the referees. I would put money on it that these "chirpers" in the stands have never opened a manual of operations or read a rule book. They also only see one side of the game - their side. They seem to forget, or choose to ignore the fact that little Johnny just slashed a guy in front of the net and got away with it, but want Peter from the opposing team called for the trip shortly thereafter.

If they watched the game for the game itself, they would see what they got away with and would not be so quick to jump all over the ref for one the other team got away with. Parents seem to forget that it is much harder to see the entire play when you are eye level with the players and that sitting up in the stands gives you a better vantage point. My husband has often said that it would be much easier to sit in the stands and ref because all those other people yelling in the stands see things that he doesn't. Also, there are many eyes in the stands and only a couple sets on the ice.

Recently, my husband had one father in the stands screaming because, in this parent's opinion, he was losing control of the game. Shortly after, a well deserved penalty was called against the father's team and he then yelled that he was calling too many stupid penalties!!! You can't have it both ways buddy! Also, it is the coach's job to keep control of his players and the officials to call the infractions as they see them.

Being a hometown (Homer) ref is not easy also. By the way, the name Homer is overused and the referees would appreciate a newer name is anyone can think of one. Those parents that harass you while reffing a game, use your first name while screaming at you, WHICH IS A NO NO, and also have to face you on the street. In some cases, Johnny's father remembers the trip that did not get called and has words with you when he sees you the next time in town. Funny how people sitting in the stands know the rules so well, but don't go get their stripes and become certified.

There are times that the refs know an infraction occurred because of the sounds or aftermath, but did not see it and therefore cannot call it. However, many eyes in the stands did see it and can't understand why something wasn't called. They can only call what they see.

I have heard many times "they get paid untaxed for doing this job". True, however, have you ever sat down to figure how much they actually make? Not much for the abuse taken, the time given, the equipment, the recertification courses, the constant upgrading with rule changes. I know of one time my husband was sent out of town with two other local refs to do a AAA play-off game. After paying for his supper and his 7 hours away from home for one game, he ended up making less than \$2.00 per hour. He gave up working time at his regular job to provide a thankless service for less than \$2.00 per hour - WHY - because he loves the kids and the game. And yes, they do get mileage - at a rate of .25 cents per km. CAA's published report states that based on 12,000 km/year, driving a cavalier (economically efficient car), the cost of operating a car is 69.8 cents per km. Once again, losing money on driving to games.

As a wife, I attend many games to watch the play. Remember, I am a spectator that tries to enjoy the game. However, there have been many times that I have paid my admission fee, only to leave early because of the abuse that is hurled at the officials. It is very difficult to sit in the stands and have people yell unsubstantiated or unknowledgeable assaults at your spouse.

There was one game that I attended with my children when they were youngsters. During this game, a lady we knew personally and that was sitting quite close to us, started screaming obscenities at my husband (using his first name). My oldest child turned to me and said "Mommy, why is she yelling at daddy like that". I decided it was time to go home. As my children have gotten older, they get the abuse from other children at school. Little Johnny's dad complained all the way home about that stupid ref, he knows nothing, what an idiot. Needless to say, little Johnny goes to school and let's my children know that their dad is a stupid idiot that knows nothing and should not be refereeing.

It just goes to show that these parents are teaching our children to disrespect the officials and it is okay to state this publicly. Each parent should sit back and take notice of their actions and attitudes towards these on-ice officials. They are there to do a service and help keep hockey alive and well. In most cases, they love kids and enjoy being with them before, during and after the game. I know that is why my husband decided to join the allegiance of referees, he loves the kids and the game. He tries to turn a deaf ear on the stands and remembers that ignorance is bliss and those that are the loudest are most often the most ignorant of the game.

People, sit back, enjoy the game for what it is....A GAME. Relax and enjoy life, before you know it, your child will be finished his minor hockey career and all that is left is the reminder of your actions.