

February 7, 2009 Saturday
FINAL EDITION

SECTION: EDITORIAL/OPINION; Pg. E4

HEADLINE: Joy of hockey ruined by poor example set by parents

BYLINE: BY JOE BELANGER

One of the greatest joys in my life was watching my son play hockey.

Of course he was going to make it to the pros.

Of course he was the best hockey player on the ice, every minute of every game.

Of course I was just like every other hockey parent . . . almost.

One major difference between me and the other hockey parents was that I usually stood alone at the end of the rink behind the glass enjoying the game but keeping my eyes glued to my son when he stepped on the ice.

His joy was my joy. His exhilaration was mine. His determination was mine. His pride was mine. His disappointment was mine. His pain was mine and never more visceral than the time he was checked from behind into the boards by a boy twice his size, knocked unconscious with a concussion. That was his last season.

But I never attacked a referee or linesman, not like a Kitchener parent who attacked a linesman coming off the ice after the man's son was checked from behind in a game at Medway arena last Saturday night between the London Junior Knights and Kitchener Junior Rangers midget AA teams.

The video images recorded by someone and posted on the website YouTube were disturbing enough. But equally disturbing was the sound of screaming, enraged people in the background.

It was that type of behaviour that drove me out of the stands and into the corner of the arena.

The pure stupidity of some parents is unlike anything I've ever experienced.

The screaming, the swearing, the threats made to each other and -- even more disturbingly -- to the children playing on the ice, children who hadn't yet reached Grade 2.

On occasion, there are fights in the stands between parents of opposing teams.

I would find it difficult to believe there's even one person reading this column who hasn't witnessed this behaviour, and recently.

And you don't have to go to a hockey rink to witness it. Stop by any hotel hosting teams for tournaments and you'll see more than enough disturbing behaviour.

Drunken parents wandering the halls, drinks in hand, socializing while their children are left to run through the hotel harassing guests, playing hockey in the halls, playing with the elevators, marking and damaging walls and furniture. There's at least one hotel in this city that hires students to operate the elevators when hockey teams visit.

On occasion, there are drunken children who've managed to separate some booze from their drunken parents, whose behaviour when sober can best be described as rude, obnoxious and arrogant.

Of course, it's unfair to generalize. Not all hockey parents behave like that. But I've experienced and witnessed enough of them to know that it is rampant, easily part of what is called the hockey culture.

And no wonder. The Kitchener parent's actions are explained away as the emotion of the moment. The police called to the scene didn't lay any charges. The parent may be banned from attending games for the rest of the season.

Just about every game my son played, he knew exactly where I'd be standing. Just about every game or practice, he'd swoop down the ice and into the corner and I'd see him steal a glance to assure himself I was there watching. And then I'd see him smile.

I can remember the few occasions when I wasn't standing in the corner and I'd see him glancing around, scanning the bleachers for my face until he found it.

Then that smile. It's a smile I remember so clearly it can still make my heart skip a beat. It's a memory that can still bring tears of happiness to my eyes.

The pure joy of my child playing hockey is unlike anything I've ever experienced in life.

It's too bad so many parents are determined -- allowed - to steal and destroy those moments. They are so fleeting. Yet the damage inflicted, especially on the children and their concept of hockey, is so permanent.