

Minor hockey offers plenty of positives, despite what you might hear.

Steve Simmons Toronto Sun

March 6 /2015

It was on the national news again the other night, the way it always seems to be, every year, the same pictures, the same stories, the same screaming about minor hockey.

One month it's about parents out of control.

One month it's about injuries and the dangers of the sport.

One month it's about the drop in registration and the high cost of playing.

And then here's how the news cycle works: We rotate the month and change the order of the problems and run the stories again.

And all the while, I want to scream at my television, throw things at the blurry images taken from YouTube and somehow try and put some context into a story we can't stop telling inaccurately. We love to trample all over our own in this country and we do it to minor hockey almost more than we do to anything else.

And it usually comes from a poll or a survey or a singular incident and it's one of those push-button topics. Everybody has a view, an opinion. Everybody wants to be heard, even those who have never spent a moment in a rink watching, coaching, refereeing, running minor hockey.

Here is where I declare my bias: I have spent most of my adult life around minor hockey. I have coached more than 1,000 minor hockey games over 27 different seasons at four different levels, and in that time I have done just about every job possible: I've run tournaments, convened divisions, tied skates, filled water bottles, sat on executive committees, kept statistics and standings, handed out trophies and pizza on banquet day and been in just about every rink in a 100-kilometre radius of this city.

And while no longer involved, I wouldn't trade in a minute of that time, any of it, for all it gave me, my family, my friends. The lifetime of relationships built, memories, trips out of town, watching your kids and others develop, not as hockey players but as people, spending family time you can reminisce about the rest of your life.

There are problems with parents in minor hockey. But from my experience, it's the minority not the majority. I may have come across maybe seven or eight truly problematic parents in my groups over those 27 years and I can recall off-hand maybe five that I would term significant outbursts in games, before games or after games.

That's five in a thousand games — a tiny percentage on the problematic scale. If you flip that around, then from my experience, more than 99% of the hockey parents were not problematic.

The news doesn't ever view it that way, especially now at a time when every incident is filmed and makes its way all over social media. The 99% story doesn't sell very well. The crazy less than 1% makes for wonderful television.

It's accurate, but not true, as they said in the movie *Absence of Malice*.

Recently, Toronto Life magazine did a story on the GTHL that was fraught with either inaccuracy or stereotypical cliché. To those who aren't involved in minor hockey, that seems to be the perception. The game is broken. The league is broken. The people are broke and broken. And if they're not broke and broken, they are damaged from the injuries of the game.

What you rarely hear: There are more injuries from snowboarding and skateboarding than there are from minor hockey. Hockey is getting safer. People at all levels are working at making it safer. There are fewer contact leagues than ever before. Almost 70% of minor hockey players are in recreational house leagues, not contact hockey. But no one ever tells that story. The game will never be perfect because of the nature of the sport, not necessarily the way it's played.

I had a boy on my team one year with concussion issues. He had six of them. None of them had happened while playing hockey. Two came from wrestling WWE style in his basement. (We didn't find out about his history until he started playing for us.)

One game, he went to hit somebody and missed and crashed into the boards. It was his seventh concussion. He never played another game for our team and I'm not sure he ever played hockey again. By today's screaming, his career ending would be attributed to the viciousness of minor hockey but the truth is something entirely different.

Is minor hockey exempt from problems? No, it has loads of them, as all sports do, as all pursuits of this kind, too. Would I make all kinds of changes to minor hockey if I could? Absolutely.

But it's important to understand what minor hockey isn't: It isn't what you see on the nightly news. It isn't a cliché. It isn't out of control. It isn't incident after incident. It isn't, for the majority, all that dangerous. It isn't, for the majority, all that expensive (when compared with other similar pursuits).

My children are now adults, having played 24 seasons of minor hockey in and around Toronto. They wouldn't trade that experience for anything. Neither would I or my wife. We were a minor hockey family. We lived that life. We loved that life. We'd hate to see someone miss out on that life because of what they see on the news.

And frankly, we miss that life.