

FROM THE WEST AND BEYOND

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When coaches make referees cry

By Larry Gompf

WHILE watching my grandson play in a playoff game last month, I noticed that one of the refs was quite young-looking with a light build. In today's rough-and-tumble hockey world, he would be too small to make the grade.

But loving the game as many young boys do, this young fellow decided on a path that would keep him involved in the game he loved. He would become a referee. What a good decision (so it would seem) on his part to give his time and understanding of the game back to the community.

But I'm sure he is second-guessing his decision now and what happened on the ice may cause him to withdraw from the game altogether. And who could blame him if he quits?

Picture this: The game is going back and forth and one team leads by a goal or two. The other team catches up and eventually the game ends up tied. Nothing is more exciting in hockey than overtime. Coaches, players, parents and grandparents are watching the back-and-forth flow. Everyone is anticipating the winning goal. If you've watched hockey, you know that OT games can end in a goal-mouth scramble, with the puck slipping in under a downed goalie. Games can end with a player coming in one-on-one on the goalie, or with a great shot from the point or a trickling puck that the goalie misjudges.

My grandson's game ended with a goal-mouth scramble. It was one of those iffy situations. I couldn't see the puck from where I was standing, but the young referee was there. He was crouched down with his whistle in his mouth, as he should have been, ready to

make the call. And after the scramble, the puck was in the net. The ref had a split-second to make his call and from what he saw, it was a goal.

Elation gushed forth for the winning team and bitter disappointment was evident on the losing team. Good coaches know how to suck up the loss, praise their team for a great year and line up to shake hands with the winning team. They take a "next-year-guys" attitude to the locker-room.

But what I saw was sheer bullying. Four grown men (coaches and managers) were verbally ganging up on the young referee who had made the call. I clearly heard the "f word" thrown out more than once. The heated discussion continued even after the older referee arrived to support his fellow official.

These coaches made it clear to the young and "learning" referee that it was his fault their team had lost the game

and that he'd better go home and learn how to ref a game of hockey. When the young ref came past me on his way to the dressing room, he was crying.

The bone of contention was that the play should have been whistled dead. There were claims that one of the winning team's players was lying on top of the goalie and he couldn't make the stop if he'd wanted to. But in nine-year-old hockey (yes, folks, this was a nine-year-olds' game), that kind of stuff is going to happen.

There were many losses on the ice that night. First of all, this young ref may not continue reffing. I know I'd be quitting if I were in his shoes. Who needs that kind of abuse? Hockey may lose a potentially great ref.

Secondly, if young guys quit reffing because of bullying by coaches, where will the Winnipeg Minor Hockey Association get refs? The number of games

played will have to be reduced. Who loses? The players.

But the biggest loss I saw that night at my grandson's game was the loss of respect. I watched as nine-year-olds watched their four adult mentors berate and bully a young fellow who wasn't much older than themselves. What does that teach these nine-year-olds about hockey, about life and being gracious in defeat? This rampant "win-at-all-costs" attitude is what's wrong with youth hockey.

P.S. I encourage everyone to watch the YouTube clip *The Magic Helmet*. A nine-year-old explains what is expected of him when he puts on a hockey helmet.

Larry Gompf is an avid fan of youth hockey, especially when it's played and coached fairly.