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**Parents, take it from this hockey dad – misbehaving from the stands is a losing game**

**By David A. Robertson**



There is an old viral video I watch from time to time on YouTube. It takes place at a girls' hockey game in Pennsylvania. The focus is on the stands, although you can see a part of the ice, some players and a referee. A player in a white jersey shoves an opposing player to the ice, and a short scuffle ensues as the ref glides in with a hand up, calling a penalty. The parents are riled up.

One person sounds like they're saying, "Get the wheels on the bus!" (Not a hockey term, to the best of my knowledge). Then a man can be seen coming down from the stands and stalking beside the glass. Suddenly, he slams the glass, open-palmed. It shatters, and the man points to what seems to be the ref.

Finally, another parent calls out sarcastically, "Way to go, Paul."

You may recall this video, which went [viral](#) when it first emerged in 2015. We connect with content – whether it’s a social media post or a book – because we find something relatable in it. When I first saw the clip, I laughed.

I found the scene hilarious: The way Paul seems to brush off the fact that he’s shattered the glass and points at the ref as though nothing out of the ordinary has happened; the casual, albeit caustic, chirp from the stands to Paul, suggesting this isn’t the first time he has lashed out. *That’s just Paul being Paul!*

At the time, I was a loud, probably obnoxious hockey parent myself, prone to calling out officials if they made a bad call – or slapping the glass with my mittens to express my discontent.

But I’m a different kind of hockey parent now, and I no longer find the clip humorous. As a dad in my 40s with three out of five kids who’ve played competitive hockey, I’ve seen my share of parents misbehaving in the stands.

It was during a playoff game for one of my kids, who was an adolescent at the time, when I had a revelatory moment. It was a raucous environment, which is fine – in no way am I saying that hockey shouldn’t be loud and passionate. But when I scanned the arena, most of the noise was coming from a place of frustration and anger – an overwhelming swell of negative emotion.

Fans, who were primarily family members of the players, were chastising the refs (almost always, vitriol is directed toward refs, who are often youth themselves); hollering at the coaches (either that the opposing team was dirty, or maybe their coach wasn’t playing their kid enough); yelling at players (all children); or throwing insults at each other.

And the parents, mostly fathers, standing at the glass, lining the end boards from one end to the other in the shape of a smile, were almost all banging on the glass incessantly. I remember watching this and thinking, “We are one bad moment away from having a viral internet moment here.”

Times like these can be instructional, if we allow them to be – how not to behave at any sporting event, let alone a youth hockey game. When I encounter scenes like this nowadays (it even happens in lower-level recreational hockey with seven-year-olds on the ice), what I feel is embarrassment for the parents and sadness for the kids, who just want to play their best and have fun.

I remember after watching one of my son’s hockey games, years before my revelatory moment, I felt guilty, and a bit foolish, about how I’d acted during the match. I had spent the game barking at the refs, calling out our coach because my son hadn’t played much in

the third period, directing my kid about what he should be doing when he was on the ice (which is the coach's job, not mine), and yes, slamming the glass once or twice.

After it was all over, I asked my son, "Do you even hear me when you're on the ice?" He quickly responded with, "No."

I realized that I'd been screaming for myself, rather than for him.

Since that time, I've set a rule for myself. I still cheer during a game – cheering is a part of sport – but only in support for the person or team I'm there for, and never against a team or player, especially a referee, who is just trying to do their job, even when they make what fans might think is a bad call. (Being from Winnipeg, an exception would be the good-natured ribbing Jets fans give opposing players.)

As parents, we have to remember who we are watching for. In the heat of the moment, it can be easy to lose track of this. I understand that. But I've seen and heard of too many kids who've quit a sport they love because of pressures they've felt from adults. Youth put enough pressure on themselves – they don't need to hear parents losing their minds in the stands. What they need is support, whether that's encouragement during a game or being driven to and from practices late at night in the middle of winter.

My oldest son has one more year of minor hockey left. After that, he'll go to university somewhere in Canada and play for another few years, but eventually the ride will be over. I want to look back on the years he played and think about the unequivocal joy he gave me, and I want him to look back on his hockey career and remember the sport in a good way.

At the end of the day, youth sports aren't about the standings, the goals or even the trophies. They're about the people our kids become while they're playing, and the people we are modelling for them based on how we conduct ourselves as we cheer them on.

Arenas are just classrooms with colder floors. Our job as parents isn't to be the loudest voice in the building, it's to be the steady one our kids can count on, win or lose.

One day, the final buzzer will sound, and the noise of the crowd will fade. What will last for them is how we made them feel while they played. If we can give them pride instead of pressure, joy instead of judgment, then maybe that's the real championship we've been chasing all along.

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