

“My Boy is Going to Play in the Big League”

How I Find Respite

So writes Canadian singer/songwriter Tom Cochrane in his hit Big League. Like me, there are a number of hockey dads that had at least one difficult swallow, when you first find out your son came into this world with Down Syndrome. For us, Arthur was our first born. Making it even more poignant, was the fact that for the previous four years, I had volunteered as a hockey coach in Strathroy, learning via the instruction camps lead by Pat “Whitey” Stapleton. I loved coaching and had developed to the next level. It just so happened that my assistant coach and his wife were expecting too. So when Arthur came into our life, I hung up my coaching skates and focused on coaching my own son, not to play hockey, but to achieve basic skills for living.

Thirteen years later, that assistant coach with his son, contacts me, and states that now he needs an assistant coach, and in particular, a bench coach without a son on the team. This wasn't just out of the blue, as we cross paths regularly and I kept asking about his coaching seasons. However, this team is no regular team. Last year they made it to the Ontario finals only to lose in three straight games. I was to be a new shot in the arm. This team and their parents have high expectations. Did I really want to meet hockey dads that you always read and hear about?

I decided yes, and Anne, my wife, cautiously went along. After all, here is a group of thirteen and fourteen year old boys, the same group of boys that my son Arthur, in another life, would be playing hockey with. Arthur knew a few of them from school, but none were what you would call friends. Developing peer friendships is difficult for DS boys especially when they do not play with or at the same intellect level. For Arthur, at age thirteen, Pokeman, Beyblades, and my rock and roll CD's are in. Arthur does not know how to skate, let alone understand even the basics of hockey strategy. Nonetheless the coach introduced me and Arthur to the hockey parents and to the team. Arthur was to be present and be himself in the dressing room and just absorb the circumstances as they unfold with his peers. This was so totally new for him.

For me, an opportunity to live a dream; to coach fifteen high achieving boys and literally push them to the next level. I never, in my minor hockey career as a player, ever made it to this high a level. So here we are the Mount Brydges Bantam A Cougars, the premier team from this village at this age group. As I am writing this story, we have played our way back to the Ontario finals, to play last year's champions, Paris Ontario, for the Ontario Minor Hockey Association All Ontario “C” division championship. That in itself is a great achievement that I am proud to be part of. Remember those parents, a great group, nothing that we could not handle.

I have learned so much along the way. My role was to dissect the opposition's strength and weaknesses and assist the coach with moulding our team's weaknesses and strengths so that we end up with an advantage during competition. What I found most challenging was that each of the our fifteen boys, learned, and responded to instruction and circumstances in their own personal way. This was not unlike coaching Arthur to achieve a simple task or a set of progressively complex tasks. I would suggest that many of us DS parents, would make great coaches, mainly because our children have forced us to breakdown complex tasks into step-by-step mini-tasks.

In hockey, we plan a passing drill to force a player to use his backhand, for example. We then repeat the drill, over and over, until the backhand becomes routine. Then we challenge the player by presenting time restrictions and finally by presenting an opposing player to intercept

the backhand pass. However, just like our DS kids, not every player is able to follow the drill from start to finish. Some need to complete step one before beginning step two. If you require all four steps to be completed in rapid succession, you may need to begin with only step one first, and then master step two before you can even consider progressing through to step four. It might take three practice days, or even three months before all boys reach their potential. As coaches, just as parents, we need to recognize rates of learning and style of receptive instruction for each player.

How about Arthur? He still does not know how to skate although he is gaining in balance while on the blades. He says he finds the noise level too loud when the boys bang along the boards during a game. He does not like hockey mom's screaming in his ear, nor their air horns. He enjoys the dressing room shenanigans. Boys will be boys. (in school they never let you have fun any more, something about code of conduct). And some days he is able to help bring in the hockey sticks after the game.

But the best part, even with all the team's successes, it all really doesn't matter. He makes my day every time he asks, "How's coaching dad?" He never asks whether we won or not.

We go to the rink together, we leave the rink together. That's a Big enough League for me.

Ed Hager

**A true advocate, keeps an open mind, recognizes differences,
and presents only POSITIVE ATTRIBUTES of his or her position.**