

I Hope They Didn't Bring Apple Juice

By Steve Simmons, Toronto Sun

There was about two minutes to play in the playoff game and I was anxiously pacing behind the bench, barking out whatever instructions seemed important at that very moment. You watch the game and you watch the clock in those final seconds, sometimes precisely at the very same time. We were up by a goal, poised to advance to the next round of the playoffs, when I felt a tug on my jacket. "Ah coach," one of my players said on the bench. "Yea," I answered, concentrating more on the game and the clock than on him at that instance. "Is there snacks today?" "Whaaaat?" I barked exasperated. "Did anyone bring snacks today?" "Huh," I looked away. "I hope they didn't bring apple juice." The young boy said. "I don't like apple juice." The moment froze me in all the playoff excitement, the way all special and meaningful moments should.

If somehow, I could have captured that conversation on tape, I would have had one of those special sporting moments for parents everywhere, the kind you need to play for coaches and executive and trainers and managers and all of us who take kids hockey way too seriously. It isn't life or death, as we like to think it is. It isn't do or die as often as we pretend it to be. In one tiny moment in one game minor hockey was reduced to what it really is about. Apple juice. OK, so it's not apple juice. But what apple juice happens to represent in all of this. The snack. The routine. The ritual. Kids can win and lose and not even give a second's thought about either, but don't forget the post-game drinks. If anything will spoil a good time, that will.

You see, it's all part of the culture of hockey. Not who wins, not who scores goals, not which team accomplished what on which night, but about whether Mom and Dad are there, whether their grandparents are in the stands watching, whether their best friend was on their team and they got a shift on the power play, and yes, about what they ate. When you get involved in hockey, when you truly put your heart into the game and into the environment and into everything, it can be when it's at its best, the game is only part of the package. It becomes a social outing for parents. It becomes a social outing for children. It should never be about who is going for extra power skating and who is going straight from minor tyke to the Ottawa Senators but about building that kind of environment, the kind of memories kids and parents and families will have forever.

Sometimes, when I stand around the arenas I can't believe the tone of the conversations I hear. The visions are so short-sighted. The conversations are almost always about today and who won and who lost and who scored. Not enough people use the word fun and not enough sell it that way either. Hard as we try to think like kids, we're not kids. Hard as we try to remember what we were when we were young, our vision is clouded by perspective and logic, something not always evident with children. Ask any parent whether they would rather win or lose and without a doubt they would say win. But ask most children what they would prefer: playing a regular shift, with power play time and penalty killing time on a losing team rather playing sparingly on a winning team, and the answer has already come out in two different studies. Overwhelmingly, kids would rather play a lot than win and play a little.

Like we said, it is about apple juice. It is, after all, about the experience. You can't know what's in a kid's mind. I was coaching a team a few years ago when I got a call from the goaltender's Father. It was the day before the championship game. The Father told me his son didn't want to play anymore. "Anymore after tomorrow." I asked. "No," the Father said. "He just doesn't want to play anymore." "Did something happen?" I asked. "He won't tell me," the Father said. I hung up the phone and began to wonder how this happened and who would play goal the next day when I decided to call back. "Can I talk to him?" I asked the father. The goalie came on the phone. "I don't want to play anymore." "But you know what tomorrow is, don't you? Are you nervous?" "No." "Then what? You can tell me." "I don't like it anymore." "Don't like playing goal?" "They hurt me," he said. "Who hurts you?" "The guys," he said "What guys?" "Our guys. They jump on me after the game. It hurts me and scares me." "Is that it?" "Yea." "Do you trust me?" "Yea." "What if I told you they won't jump on you and hurt you anymore. Would you play then?" "Are you sure?" "I'm sure." "Then I'll play." And that was the end of the goalie crisis. The kid was scared and wouldn't tell his parents. The kid loved playing but didn't love being jumped on after winning games.

You can't anticipate anything like that as a coach. You can't anticipate what's in their minds. It's their game, we have to remember. Not our game. They don't think like we do or look at the sport like we do. They don't have to adjust to us, we have to adjust to them. We have to make certain we're not spoiling their experience. Our experience is important too, but the game is for the children and not for the adults. We can say that over and over again, but the message seems to get lost every year. Lost in too many coaches who lose perspective and who think nothing of blaming and yelling and bullying. Lost by parents who think their son or daughter is the next this or the next that and they are already spending the millions their little one will be earning by the time they finish hockey in the winter, 3-on-3 in the summer, power skating over winter break, special lessons over March break, pre-tryout camp before the AAA tryouts in May and a couple weeks of hockey school, just to make certain they don't go rusty.

I have asked many NHL players how they grew up in the game. My favorite answer came from Trevor Linden, who has captained more than one team. He said he played hockey until April and then put his skates away. He played baseball all summer until the last week of August. He went to hockey camp for one week then began his season midway through September with tryouts. No Summer hockey. No special schools. No skating 12 months a year. "I didn't even see my skates for about five months a year. I think the kids today are playing way too much hockey and all you have to do is look at the development to see it really isn't producing any better players. "We have to let the kids be kids." When, I asked Gary Roberts recently, did he think he had a future in hockey. "When I got a call from an agent before the OHL draft," he said. "Before that, it was just a game we played." Do me a favor: Until the agent comes knocking on your teenager's door, let's keep it that way. A game for kids. And one reminder, I don't care what the age: Don't forget the snacks.

Steve Simmons writes a city column for the Toronto Sun when he isn't coaching his Avenue Road minor atom select team or Vaughan peewee house league team. His syndicated Sunday sports column is the most read sports column in Canada.