

Coach Rex's Corner

The Circle of Life - Making a Difference

I have been quite active for over 25+ years within Calgary's hockey coaching fraternity. While operating my full time Tucker Hockey business for more than 14+ years, I have instructed over 7,000 hockey sessions / practices in almost all of the 60 or so Calgary area rinks. This has provided opportunities to connect with many hockey people in our city. It's not uncommon for me to run into someone I know within the local hockey community.

Such was the case during the winter of 2016 at the largest arena in Calgary, the Saddledome. I was watching a Calgary Flames game from the press box when Troy Franks said hello. I had coached Troy within the Calgary Junior Hockey League. As it was more than 20 years ago, I initially didn't recognize Troy at first. It was a pleasant moment seeing him again. Troy was working in the Flames press box as an NHL off Ice Official taking game stats.

Reflecting back over the past 20 years I must admit it made me feel a little old! I have many fond memories of coaching Troy. I recall adding Troy as the last player to our team roster that year. He was a very polite, pleasant, hard working young man and was quite mature for his teenage years. On occasion throughout the season, Troy would phone to say he had an exam the next day and if it was ok, he would miss practice that night to study. I would say yes and emphasize...just give you're "A game" next time we play. Troy inspired his teammates with his strong work ethic and two way play. That season, Troy won our team's most improved player award. I won the league's coach of the year award but would have given up this honour to make it to the playoffs. We missed the playoffs by 3 points – it was very a tough ending to a very rewarding season.

The rest of the 1995 year was a challenge for me because I spent the year unemployed. So in September prior to the start of the 95 – 96 season, I decided to resign from my volunteer head coaching position. I just couldn't commit to coaching due to the uncertainty and demands of not working. I remember receiving a phone call from Troy that particular September asking if I would be coaching the team again. I was saddened to say no. I felt the disappointment in

his voice. His kind words at the time during a very difficult period of my life meant a great deal to me. I felt that I had made a positive influence / difference in his young life with my coaching philosophy and ways.

After brief chats with Troy in the Flames press box this year, I thought we should get together, catch up, and talk some hockey and learn about the NHL off ice official's world too.

Here's a summary of our recent conversation.

Troy, tell us a little about yourself and your family?

Well I'm a born and raised hockey enthusiast. I come from a family of very loving and unbelievably supportive parents Pat and Shirley, along with an older (5 years older) sister Jill who is like a best friend and an amazing aunt, and an older brother Mark of 4 years who made it to a couple NHL camps back in the early 90's and played overseas for a few too.

Today I am engaged to a stunning gal Carlie who has been very supportive and keeps this household together. Along the way we created our own little crew and we have a couple boys who happen to be the newest inspiration to my life. Kaden is my 15 year old step-son who has been a solid part of my life since he was 9 and my son Jacko (Jack) who is 3 ½.

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As for myself, well, I'm now a 40 year old who plays the odd men's recreational game and I play in the spring with 25 old buddies who for the most of them I played with through all the years of minor hockey, Junior and all different stages.

I grew up playing this game of hockey since I could walk and on my first team at 4. I scored my first goal by lying on the ice in a pile of kids in front of the net and I happened to be the one lucky boy who swung his stick along the ice and knocked that puck into the net. Ever since that day, I grew up loving and living this game more and more.

It always got harder and harder to make the big squad as I got older, but that's a good thing. It made me realize that it's up to me to make the big team and not anyone else. I was always one of the "smaller players" on the team as I had a very late growth spurt and my birthday is in November and as corny as it may sound, 4-9 months difference in growing can make or break a players size and his ability to crack the team. Not always making the cut, I tried to never give up. It wasn't easy putting on a smile every game knowing that you didn't make the #1 team, but my thought was "at least I'm playing hockey". I played all levels but also missed a year. My parents are very supportive people as I mentioned, but they were and are still strong willed people who taught me a lot through the years. Not only do you have to like what you're doing, but you also have to put in the effort and do well in school as well. Well my grade 8 didn't fair to well for me and I had some pretty low grades and my dad told me that if I didn't improve, I wouldn't be playing hockey next year. It happened. My grades didn't improve because I didn't put in the effort and all I wanted to do was hang out at the ODR (outdoor rink) and play street hockey after school and on nights or weekends I didn't have my own hockey to go to. Grade 9 was a year that was hockey free. It was a long winter to say the least. It's safe to say that my grades improved in grade 9 and I was back on skates in grade 10. That was a huge lesson learnt for myself and I'm glad my parents stood their ground with it. Even if we don't want to admit it at the time, a time will come when we realize just how good we had it as kids playing this game and how the hard lessons our parents taught us weren't always easy for them to make either. I could tell it crushed them inside to take hockey away from me. Through the next few years, I fought my way onto teams, got cut from teams and even switched quadrants to make the next level. That's where Rex Tucker came into play; going from the Buffalo Association to the NE Association for my start in Junior B with the Canucks.

Rex gave me a shot as a 17 year old in the fall of 1994 after I was released from the Junior B Rangers the week before. He ended up teaching me more about life's efforts than just hockey. Rex never gave up on me even when I was out played. I wasn't the biggest guy on our team and certainly wasn't the most talented. I was what people called "The Grunt". The guy that went into the corners even against the biggest players and blocked many shots. Rex had trust in me to put me on the PK (Penalty Kill) and every so often, maybe even on the PP (Power Play). Practice was important to Rex as a coach. He ran good hard practices. It made us a team that never gave up. The will of our coach gave us the strength to prove that we could win. Some games we proved it, and some we didn't. This Junior B season was the year when I did my most personal growth. The next year I made the Canucks as a first liner and penalty play quarterback, but I didn't continue to play for the Canucks after November. It wasn't the same and it was only because Rex wasn't a part of it. I decided to join some good buddies and relax a bit in another junior league. It was fun, but just not the same.

I had a lot of coaches through the years and a couple were good. A couple of them became friends. But no other coach had the mental capacity and will of Rex Tucker!

You mentioned you are now a restaurant business owner – tell us about your business set up / endeavours?

Since I came out of high school in 1995, I started working in the restaurant industry while going to college. I had my own marketing company in Promotional Merchandise for a few years and I fell in love with being my own boss. In 2009 a small and short recession ended that episode in my life and got me back into the restaurant industry once again. Since then I've worked for a couple different companies and it opened doors to where I am now. I'm the Managing Partner of the Original Joe's in Kensington here in North West Calgary since August 2012. It's been an adventure and well worth the investment. It's always fun and makes me happy daily.

Can you describe your role as an NHL off ice official?

The role I was hired for is in the HITS department. That's where myself and a few others keep the following stats -Hits, Shots, Giveaways, Takeaways, Plus Minus, Penalties, Fights and Stoppage of Play. This also includes Time on Ice

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as well. It's a true privilege to be a part of the NHL as there's only approximately 670 of us in North America.

Can you expand on your involvement with concussion monitoring at each Calgary Flames home game?

As one of the Concussion Spotter's, it's a new position brought into the league in 2015/2016 season in order to assist the team trainers on looking out for head injuries to these players. If a player or ref or linesman gets hit to head in any way, i.e. a flying elbow, shoulder to head hit, head butt, punch to the head, puck to the head or a high stick, it's our responsibility to report this event to the Neurologist in New York and they'll look over the incident from their point of view and report back to us and advise us if the trainer of that specific players team needs to pull the player off the bench and put him through the mandatory concussion protocol. It's important to know that I'm not a brain surgeon or head expert, but I did have several concussions myself and can relate to the symptoms and procedures of the injured player(s).

After monitoring the game stats such as hits, giveaways, turnovers etc, what have you discovered / learned about the NHL game?

Since joining the NHL, I have learned there are so many details that go into every play and every game. It really is a well greased machine and there's dozens if not hundreds of people involved in every play from every angle of the game. I've learned more rules that not even a die hard fan would know to look for. The Rule Book is thick, well organized and documented.

What do you like best about being an NHL off Ice Official?

Being asked to become a part of the league that I had dreamed about playing in was a pretty awesome feeling. Even though it wasn't as a player or coach, it was something that I couldn't say no to. It doesn't pay the big bucks. There's no fame or fortune or endorsement contracts, but it does allow all of us Off Ice guys to feel that we a part of the game and in reality we do our part to bring the experience for all different levels to not only Flames fans, but also hockey fans in general with the stats we keep. With all of these "Fantasy Leagues" going on, it's amazing how much attention can be paid for every stat recorded from the public's point of view.

From the bird's eye view in the press box – how do you see the game differently from say the average Flames fan sitting in the stands?

The play itself is much faster and looks so much more open than it actually is on ice. It's easy to say "How did he not shoot that puck?" when we see the time or space he had or "How did he not see that hit coming?", but actually he probably only had 1 second or less to gain control and release the puck or dodge a big body coming hard at him. We can definitely see the big hits about to happen most of the time, and they can be BIG!

How do you see the NHL game changing / evolving over the last few years from your seat in the press box?

The game has sped up and got a lot less scrappy that's for sure. Players seem to have more speed and hand talent,

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but with the speed of the game now and the leg strength of the players, that “space” can be closed very quickly. I think there’s more stick work and small hacks/slashes than 10-15 years ago, but there’s also a lot less big hits and fights. In saying that, there’s still a certain mental strength and commitment a player needs in order to stay in the big league and that’s probably the hardest part to maintain. The commitment to physical strength is stronger now than ever. It’s a must.

Troy, I felt we had a very good player – coach relationship back in 1994-1995 more than 20 years ago, do you have any fond memories playing for the Junior B Canucks in the Calgary Junior Hockey League? Any life skills learned from this hockey experience?

Even after 20 years ago, I still have many fun memories. Off ice, we had a variety of guys from different areas of the city and even FUJI, one of 3 Japanese players who were brought over to Calgary by Dave King to learn the more aggressive Canadian junior game. We had shinny games on ponds and on a farm just out of town. We had team social events. It was a good year for team bonding.

On the ice, the memories are many. Some during practices and working harder than ever to prove I belonged on the PK and out working teammates in order to get ice time. Going up against the best teams in town; some of the best and biggest in the province were always nerve racking, but exhilarating. I didn’t score many goals that season, but the goals I did, I remember to this day like it was yesterday. To be completely honest to everyone reading this article, my best memory is really of having the kind of coach we all wish we had every year, every game and every shift during our playing days. Rex Tucker is to this day my favourite coach, the guy that truly believed in me at a young age in junior hockey and gave me the chance and ability and most of all, the confidence to go out and compete with the big guys and make heads turn and make him proud of his team. He had the understanding that I was still in high school and I had grades to keep up and that grade 12 was important.

Our team lead by Rex was a good team, brought together by him and a team that was taught to be proud no matter what the outcome of the game. Rex Tucker is my favourite memory of the Junior B Canucks!

What other interests do you have besides your current business and hockey positions?

I love playing most sports. I’m interested in business and growth; and obviously trying to plan for retirement.

I’d have to say that golf, BBQ’s and biking riding with the family are my summer activities. Winter includes hitting the gym; skating every so often and staying healthy/fit are a huge priority. I’ll always look for the next step in business but I’m happy where I’m at now!

I’m also doing a bit of acting on the side. I’ve been a background actor on an HNO U.K. show called Tin Star where I played an “Oil Worker” in the background of a bar scene, and most recently I played a Sheriff in a series titled “Psycho Recreated” which will be aired on CTV through Canada and REELZ in the U.S. in the spring of 2017... It’s been a lot of fun and I look forward to possibly being in some commercials along the way as well.

Troy, do you have any other future goals and ambitions?

Yes, to provide a nice life for my family and continue on the same track to even bigger and better success.

Editor’s Note:

An example of the circle of life; Troy, it was great to catch up after so many years, to talk a little hockey and to know that you are doing great! Seeing you now as a mature family man and a success within the Calgary business community – is very heart warming. Troy, thanks for taking the time to do a Hockey Zones article and for your very generous and kind words. I wish you the very best my friend both in and out of our great game! Happy trails! See you again soon at a Flames game! Take care.

