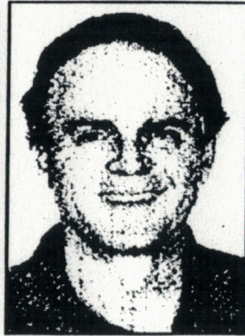


What is a toughness? What is a tough hockey player?

Jack BLATHERWICK



One rule you can take to the bank: If a hockey player is not tough, he'll never be great. But, what is toughness? Is it the same for high school or bantam players as it is for pros, junior and college players?

Absolutely not. Toughness is defined much differently for junior players and pros than it is for high school players and younger. It is because the higher levels are so visible on TV that younger players believe they should act out their toughness by getting even with an opponent after a big hit.

Last week I talked with a hockey father in Chicago who was upset that his son was instructed by his bantam coach to slash an opponent and start a fight. One could watch high school hockey in Minnesota for 50 years and never see a coach send a player out to deliberately hurt an opponent.

The Chicago father described a typical bantam or midget game in Illinois as something that looked much more like a war than a hockey game. Every check is an attempt to maim; the stick is more of a weapon than a tool for skills.

He also said he was in Minnesota last winter and saw a high school game at Apple Valley. "The skating, passing and playmaking were awesome," he said. "And

there was hardly a penalty in the entire game. Is that the way high school hockey is always played up there?"

That, folks, is the tradition passed down to us by great coaches, referees and players before us.

And that is a tradition worth keeping. Henry Boucha, Neal Broten, Mike Antonovich, John Mayasich, Phil Housley and Dave Spehar are just a few of the players who dominated our high school tournament with artistic brilliance, and the list could fill this entire newspaper.

Coaches like Larry Ross, Rube Gustafson, Willard Ikola and Tom Saterdalen led teams — disciplined teams that didn't beat themselves with penalties — to several state championships.

Minnesota high school and youth hockey is played more by the rule book than hockey in other areas. Some of the best officials in history, men like Gordie Lee, Don Wheeler and Lou Cotroneo, have passed this message on to the present generation, so Minnesota referees use the rules to protect the skills of the game.

How does a player show toughness in Minnesota hockey? Not like some junior players or goons in the NHL. At those levels of hockey, they call a player tough if he retaliates when he's hit. It doesn't seem to matter that the retaliation leaves his team short-handed. In their code he is supposed to stand up for his macho pride, abandon the team and show his willingness to fight if he's knocked down.

Of course, most players in the NHL are genuinely tough. They get to loose pucks when they're going to get hit. Defensemen drop in front of slap shots. Forwards ignore abuse in front of the offensive net and fight for rebounds. Goaltenders face slap shots from 30 feet and never flinch.

But, it's obvious their team suffers when they take a penalty just to get even with an opponent. And at this point toughness is confused with selfishness.

Perhaps the toughest athletes in any sport, offensive linemen in the National Football League, would never retaliate and risk a 15-yard penalty because that would stop an offensive drive. They get in the face of rushing defensive linemen every play, just to protect their quarterback.

The tradition in football is to demonstrate toughness by taking a hit to win a game, ignoring a cheap shot to get a touchdown. Wide receivers go up for passes knowing they're going to get hit from behind. Quarterbacks step up into the pocket and throw as they're getting drilled by 300 pound linemen.

That's their job, and it takes exceptional toughness to make that kind of commitment to the team.

After catching a 30-yard pass and getting hit in mid-air, if a receiver would jump up and push the defensive back for hitting too hard, he'd get a 15-yard penalty. So, instead, he heads back to the huddle, determined to catch the next pass on the same pattern, knowing he'll be hit again.

In Minnesota youth hockey, playing tough means playing your game no matter what the opponent does. When you skate into the offensive corner for a loose puck, you can be sure of two things: you'll get hit by the defenseman, and your team will have a better chance to score.

You are a genuinely tough player when you make the play that helps your team, even though you are going to get hit. If you're a forward doing your job in front of the offensive goal, and your defenseman takes a shot from the point, you might get hit in the ankle to make a screen or deflection. You're sure to get cross checked, and, after the whistle, if you stand facing the goalie, you'll probably get a cheap shot from behind.

If, at that time, you just skate away and line up for the faceoff, your team may be on the power play, and your play makes the difference

between winning and losing.

If you retaliate in the slightest manner, the referee will toss both of you because you've made his call much easier.

Unfortunately, the higher levels of hockey give us a terrible model, because in the WCHA, in the USHL and in the NHL, a player shows he's tough by retaliating, and coaches buy into this tradition.

Who is the tougher athlete, the pro hockey player who retaliates even though it hurts his team, or the NFLer who takes the hit and plays to win?

It is a strange tradition in pro hockey, as well as a poor example of commitment to the team.

Fortunately, there is a better tradition and role model in Minnesota high school hockey.

The two state champions last season were Apple Valley and Warroad. It is not coincidence they were also the two toughest teams.

Larry Hendrickson, the coach at Apple Valley, and Cary Eades, the coach at Warroad, did tremendous jobs teaching their players what it takes to be winners. On both teams, physical play was considered an important part of the game. Not only did they play the body well, but they were unaffected when the other team did the same.

It's not easy to ignore a cheap shot, especially when the hockey you see on TV gives you such a poor example. It's not easy to drop in front of shots, take a hit in the corner, win every battle for loose pucks, ignore threats from an opponent, avoid penalties and play tough on behalf of your team.

Then again, it's not easy to be champions. Just ask Apple Valley and Warroad.

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