

Skating on thin ice



By Nate Smelle

NO MATTER WHICH town, city, or municipality I find myself in, it always feels like home at the local arena. As a hockey player from a hockey family, I, like many young Canadians grew up on the ice. From the age of four until I was in my early twenties, if I wasn't on the ice helping my team earn a 'W', I was in the stands serving out a suspension and cheering on my team. Well, for the sake of accuracy the suspensions didn't really become part of my routine until I watched the movie Slap Shot around the age of 11. After seeing the Hanson brothers tear it up on screen while doing their part to earn the fictitious Charlestown Chiefs the Federal League championship, I remember feeling inspired to try and match their intensity whenever my blades touched the ice from that point on. While I was never the so-called 'best' - often defined as the top-scoring player - on the team, the fact I was never afraid to go into the corners and/or drop the gloves when necessary, usually earned me respect from my fellow players, as well as the coaches, parents, and fans on both teams. Don't get me wrong, with a last name like Smelle, by the time I started playing Jr. B hockey I became accustomed to hearing the opposing team's fans and parents yelling, 'Smelle you stink!' At first the jeers would get under my skin, but my grandfather opened my eyes to the message between the lines that our team's rivals were shouting out from the stands. Noticing a couple of the other team's fans really pouring it on during a game in Lindsay one night, my grandfather took time to drop a little wisdom after getting kicked out of the game for fighting early in the third. Until this day, the advice he shared that night has continued to help me overcome any challenges that I am faced with. Stopping by the pub on the way home to talk about the game over a couple beers, the conversation went something like this: 'Great game out there! You really had their number,' he said. 'Thanks,' I responded. 'I don't know, the fans weren't too happy with me.' 'That's good! If you're making the other team's fans happy then you have something to worry about.' 'I guess that's true. Still, they were p***ing me off.' 'Don't let them throw you off your game. Use that anger on the ice. You scored two goals and gave one of their best players a thumping. Of course they don't like you. Remember, when the other team's fans are yelling at you and calling you names from the stands, you're standing out.' When he shared this advice with me it was as if a light turned on in my brain. While taking in the Bancroft U-9 Jets game on Sunday at the North Hastings Community Centre, I thought of the many life lessons I had acquired over the years, in and around the rink. These words of wisdom, along with the education obtained through observation, all courtesy of the game of hockey. What would my life have looked like without the opportunity to learn about life while playing the sport I love? Thankfully, for me at least, I will never need to answer this question. Sadly, given the uncertain future of the ice surface at the North Hastings Community Centre in Bancroft, however, the next generation of young hockey players and figure skaters throughout North Hastings could very realistically find out what life without hockey looks like. As I stood there watching what was in my opinion the best game I have seen any of the Jets' teams play this season, I heard a couple of the parents discussing what they were going to do next season if the ice surface at the North Hastings Community Centre evaporated. If municipalities don't work together to find a solution, as Bancroft's Mayor Paul Jenkins recently suggested, 'we're going to lose the ice surface.' It is no big secret that most of the local municipalities in North Hastings are eager to expand their tax-base. Before municipalities such as Hastings Highlands and Faraday

turn their back on the North Hastings Community Centre completely, it is in their best interest ? and the interest of their residents and ratepayers ? to think about the potential for progress that they are abandoning. Recognizing the arena's economic importance as a potential draw for new residents is not difficult; just put yourself in the skates of one of the many young families who migrated north to cottage country during the pandemic. How many of these families would have moved to one of the municipalities in North Hastings if they knew their children could not play hockey or learn to figure skate in the community they live? Further, and arguably more importantly in terms of the arena's potential to establish real and meaningful societal progress, we must not overlook the experiential education and social skills young hockey players and figure skaters receive through their involvement in such sports? There was a lot of chatter during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding how kids need to be in class to learn and grow together, both intellectually and socially. Does the mental health and happiness of our local youth still matter? If so, then all seven of the local municipalities in North Hastings need to drop the drama and start working together on ensuring a sustainable future for the North Hastings Community Centre. As ?The Flower? Guy Lafleur once said, ??Hockey is not a one-man show; it's a team effort. If you don't work as a team, even if one or two guys aren't working, you're not going to win. That's the way it is.? Without a little inter-municipal cooperation on this issue, the only ice surfaces we will have to skate on in North Hastings will be on our local lakes each winter.