

# It's the pits, but Willsie loves his job

By Jim Cressman  
of The Free Press

John Willsie leans back in the chair. The inscription on his sweat-soaked T-shirt sums it up.

"This is the pits."

Willsie has just finished refereeing his 50th game this season in the Ontario Hockey League. The worst part is ahead — the 2½-hour drive home from Oshawa through the snow and dark of night. It will be 2 a.m. Monday morning when he gets into London.

But it's a drive the six-year veteran of the major junior circuit is looking forward to. He'd left for Belleville at 9:30 a.m. Saturday, with wife Jean standing at the front door waving goodbye and shouting "have fun!"

"This is the part that's not worth it," Willsie says later Saturday night as last call is announced. He'd worked in front of a full house in Belleville, and it will be the same the next night in Oshawa. It's the 15th time this season he's been on an overnight trip.

"Chris (his 10-year-old son) has a hockey

game tomorrow at noon. I should be there. My wife and three kids are sitting at home and I'm here. But you know, as unfair as all this is to my family, when I've sat at home and said this is going to be it, they turn out to be my biggest supporters."

Linesman Jim Carman, who was picked up on the 401 at Highway 97 earlier in the day, has a similar story.

"I was getting out of bed this morning and Jamie says 'Dad, do you have to go referee today? Can't we go play hockey, just you and me?'"

Why do these guys in the striped shirts log hundreds of miles each year for the Ontario Hockey League?

It can't be for the money. Willsie's remuneration worked out to about \$3 an hour for the weekend trip. Carman's was half that.

"I referee because I like the kids," Willsie says. "Kids like (former Kitchener Ranger) Jeff Larmer, who sees Dave Lynch working the lines in the Meadowlands, and the first thing he says is 'Say hello to Willsie for me.'"

"You do it for the kids because they have to give up so much to play the game. The sacrifices they make — leaving their families, their homes, their schooling.

"Hey, I don't want this to come across that I'm feeling sorry for myself because I'm not. There are only so many guys in Ontario that can referee in this league, so I feel quite fortunate."

There are 13 referees and 38 linesmen on staff with the OHL. Seven of the referees work a full slate of games. Willsie, rated at the top, will work close to 90 before calling it a season. That's more than most players will play.

It's a good day for a trip. The 401 is bare and the sun shining. Willsie wants to get away early so he can get to Belleville in time to watch the TV game that afternoon.

A quick stop for Carman, who lives in Mount Pleasant, and it's back on the highway. Local linesmen will join them for the two games.

Lunch (the pre-game meal) is a \$3.35 carryout chicken dinner. Herb Morell, the OHL's co-ordinator of officials, counts the nickels. Willsie splurges for a small container of potato salad.

Brantford Alexanders are playing Kitchener Rangers on the tube. Willsie proves referees have feelings as he laments the fact he had to give Alexanders' Mike Hoff-

man a match penalty for spearing two nights before. Hoffman won't get to play on TV this day.

It's 6 p.m., 90 minutes until opening faceoff. Time to head to the rink for the game between the Bulls and Cornwall Royals. It will be a big one as they're jockeying for playoff positions.

It's the first trip into the rink for Willsie and Carman and they're amazed at the size of the ice surface — Olympic, 200 feet by 100. "I figure if (Jim) Lever can handle it, I can," Willsie says.

The big banner hanging on the wall at one end is an eye catcher. "Belleville McFarlands, world amateur champions, 1959," it proclaims.

Royals' coach Jocelyn Guevremont uses an old play on Willsie.

"What would you call when a player skates from the blueline and really hits another into the boards?" Guevremont asks.

"I'd call a major," Willsie replies. "(So-and-so) only called a minor the other night," Guevremont says.

Willsie winks. His companions know he'd be lucky if he got his arm up for a penalty.

Willsie goes for a walk. Carman and Peter Carroll, the other linesman, don't follow. Carman has learned Willsie likes to be by himself for a short time before a game. A chance to collect his thoughts.

"I never try and anticipate what kind of game it's going to be. I leave it up to the kids to see what kind of game they want to play," Willsie says.

But once in the dressing room, he's singing and whistling and just plain raising a little Cain. It's a good thing for the OHL his singing isn't what he relies on out on the ice.

Willsie complains his arms are sore tonight.

"How can they be sore? You never get them up," Carman says. Willsie can usually get through a game with five or six penalties.

"Talking about penalties," he says. "The other night in Sault Ste. Marie I got turned around and I charged right over and gave the penalty to the London bench. I was staring Paul McIntosh right in the face. I said 'Oh-oh, I think I'm on the wrong side here.'"

Game time and the crew heads onto the ice. One fan leans over the boards and yells "Hey ref, you dummy!" Willsie smiles. "They know me here."

Another yells "Not you again." Fans are observant.

After the first period, Carman slips off his sweater and pulls on a dry T-shirt. "The secret of my success," he says.

The game continues without incident. The Bulls win and the public address system blares "Wasn't That A Party?" by The Rovers. It was more like a piece of cake.

It's a quick shower and off for a few cold ones.

Time for some sleep.

It's Sunday morning and Willsie and Carman are deep in sleep. All of a sudden there's a car horn honking outside the motel room door. How ignorant of them. It's 11 a.m.

Then a loud bang on the door. It's referee Bob Morley of Hamilton and linesman Rick Zbucki, en route to Kingston for an afternoon affair.

Willsie ribs Morley about horning in on his story. Finally the intruders leave and the stomachs are growling. It's off to brunch.

That still leaves a couple of hours to kill before checking out and heading for Oshawa. The discussion gets around to the occupations of the various officials.

Willsie is a foreman in the family construction company. Carman is a production supervisor in a plant which makes car relays.

How do they get time off for the weekday trips?

"I'd rather not get into that," Willsie says. "My dad might read the paper."

It's time to make the short drive to Oshawa. It's more than an hour until the opening faceoff, but it's easy to see this is a big one. The Generals and Peterborough Petes are battling for first and the fans have filled the standing room already.

Jim Houston, only 20 but a top-notch linesman, joins them.

The first period is over and the Pete's Venci Sebek is standing in the runway behind the penalty box. He's out with an in-



JOHN WILLSIE  
--- players keep him coming back



Bruce Jones for The Free Press

Referee John Willsie, left, and linesman Jim Houston relax before duty in another Ontario Hockey League game.

jury and Willsie stops to ask how he enjoyed playing for Team USA in the recent world junior championships.

"I enjoyed it. It was hockey. There was no cheap stuff. But you still have to bitch at the referees," Sebek says with a laugh.

It's clear Willsie has established a tremendous rapport with the players. That's because he never shows them up. He treats them like men. They go away from a discussion feeling like the sign hanging in the store — "The customer is always right."

The second period is over and Willsie slumps in his chair in the dressing room.

"Twenty more minutes and I can go home to my good friend, and sometimes foe, Jenna."

The buzzer sounds, the Generals have won a thriller. It was a test for Willsie — three fights — but he got it in with no big trouble. "I was generous tonight," he says to Arnold, the official scorer. "I even gave (Generals' goalie) Pete Sidorkiewicz an assist."

The snow starts coming down on the trip home. It's not bad compared to other winters, but he hasn't seen much white stuff this year so it's a challenge.

Pickering, Toronto, Mississauga, Milton, Guelph, Kitchener, Cambridge (bye to Carman), Woodstock, Ingersoll, Dorchester ... the highway exit signs don't come fast enough.

It's been a good trip. Less than a kilometre from the turnoff, some clown almost ruins it as he whips by and then cuts in front as the Wellington Road sign looms large.

The clock on the dashboard says 2:05 and Willsie is in his driveway.

Oh-oh. His troubles are just about ready to start.

"I forgot my key. I'll have to knock on the door. Now this really is the pits."