

Some observations on a long hockey season

Merchants' roller-coaster ride brought highs and lows

It reminded me of that moment on a roller coaster ride when you realize there are no wild turns or loops left, that, despite the fact that you're still moving, the ride is over and you will merely glide to a halt, get out and wait until the next ride.

That's how the end of the Milton Merchants junior B hockey club's season felt. It was a wild ride with a depressing anticlimax. Looking back, if the whole thing had ended after the Merchants' amazing recovery from a 3-1 deficit to beat Aurora for the Central League championship, we'd still be basking in the reflected glory of our ice heroes.

Unfortunately the season continued, with little for the Merchants to gain. Sure, winning the all-Ontario title would have been nice but the thrill was gone, and the chance of tarnishing the league championship accomplishment seemed too big a price to pay.

The diehards stayed on, but the irregular hockey fans, the ones that swelled attendance at Memorial Arena, spoke volumes as the roller coaster slowed. Memorial Arena was packed to the rafters for Game Seven of the Central League final against Aurora but after that crowds thinned out. In fact games in the Ontario playdowns at-

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tracted only about 90 per cent of the Aurora game crowd.

The roller coaster was slowing down but too many of us were too enthralled with the sensation to get off. Following a junior B team closely all season, being a fan, makes you something like a member of the team.

Your joy at a goal, disappointment on a poor play, hoots of derision at the opposition or the referees, mirror that of the players. It gives the home team a feeling that they aren't alone in their joy, their shame or their desire to win. Playing at home is an advantage because of this.

Sometimes players lose sight of the plight of the fan. From a fan's perspective it is difficult to put your heart and soul into something to which you have little or no direct contribution. You are powerless to use anything save your voice to help in a victory.

Though a fan has one advantage. The mutability of the team is of little concern. You cheer for a sweater. Even the endearingly 1950s look of the Milton Merchants' sweaters and the simple double 'M' logo will bring a rise come next year. That advantage is the fan's, it is only the rare player who rises above the sweater.

The fan of course can never know the team the way the members know it. They can't know the internal squabbles, the cliques; and the little jokes, heartbreaks and memories that teammates will always share. Several years from now the memories of the players and the fans together will form a more perfect picture of what really happened.

The human mind is a wondrous device, which, without prompting, strips away the details of events and reduces them to the bare essentials. The basic facts too often get in the way of a good memory, and serve to distort the richness of the experience.

There's always next year for the fans of junior hockey. For the players, they may pick up a stick and play the game they love next season, but they will be on a different team; a team with new problems, new hopes and eventually new memories.

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