

WHAT IS IT ABOUT A HOCKEY rink that can turn a rational individual into a raving lunatic at the drop of a hockey puck?

Adults who lead sane and normal lives seem to undergo a “Jekyll and Hyde” transformation that leaves them breathing fire and spitting venom, more often than not in the direction of an official.

If only they could step back and ask themselves a few simple questions:

- What kind of example are you setting for your children or others sitting around you?
- Has it ever occurred to you that officials may have families in the stands, too?

Honest answers to such questions would allow parents to understand how their actions are perceived on both sides of the boards, by players on the ice and other spectators in the stands.

“We need to repeatedly bring to the attention of parents that this is only a game,” says Bob Klein, a recipient of USA Hockey’s prestigious Chet Stewart award who has four decades of officiating experience, in addition to 15 years as a coach.

“We need to remind [parents] that in 20 years this boy or girl will have a watercolor of memories regarding his or her hockey experience.”

Parents, and how they carry themselves, obviously have a big impact on those important memories.

It’s no surprise that the majority of abuse raining down from the stands is directed at officials. As evaluation coordinator for the Minnesota Hockey Officials Association, Bruce Carlson has logged enough bleacher time to reach that conclusion.

“It’s much easier to yell at a stranger than at your kid, their teammates or even the opposition,” Carlson says. “It would be useful to remind these folks that they are, at all times, role models to the young people around them.”

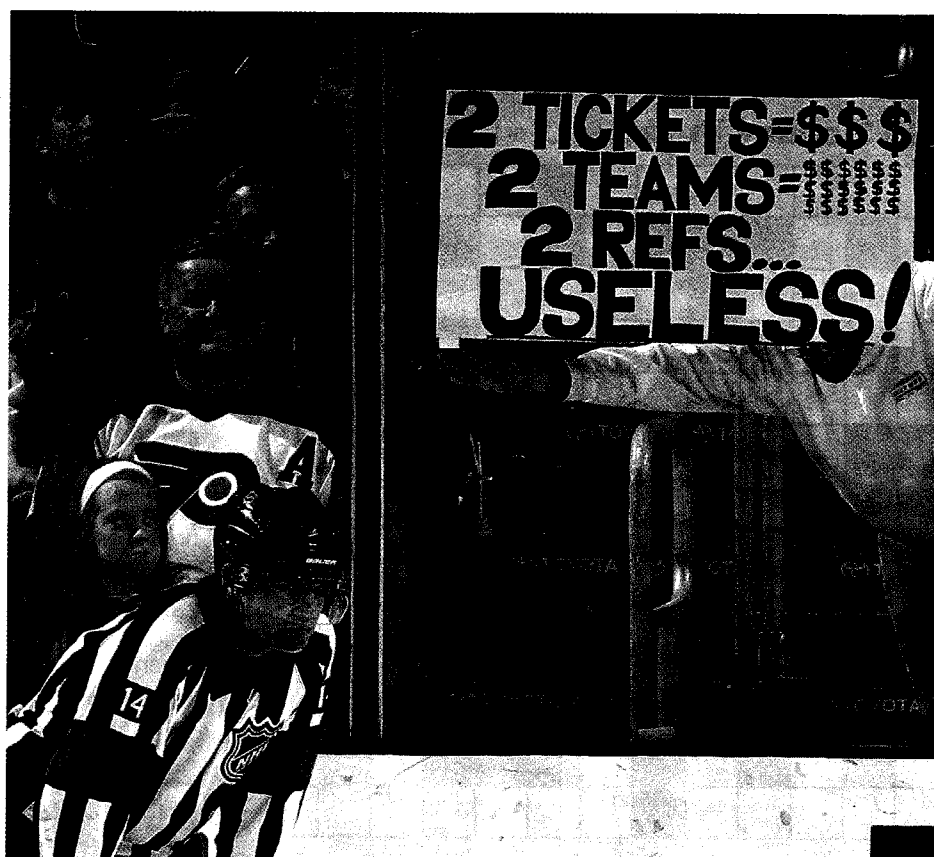
As a 24-year veteran who has officiated multiple world championships, Rick Looker has “been around the block.” He said that parents think they’re yelling at a “striped sweater” and fail to see the person inside of it.

“I don’t think they even realize that they may be screaming at a kid who is in his first or second year as an official,” he says.

This idea, in and of itself, should be enough to give people pause. In addition they forget that the referee being targeted for abuse has family too, members of which could very well be in attendance.

“There were many times I heard people attack my father,” says Paul Stewart, an icon of American officiating who worked 13 NHL seasons, and is now director of hockey officiating for the East Coast Athletic Conference. Stewart’s father, Bill, himself logged 11 NHL seasons as a referee.

“It’s hard to alter human nature, which tends to look for a scapegoat when things don’t



Berating and ridiculing officials at the NHL level has a trickle down effect as parents tend to take out their frustration on officials working at the youth hockey level.

go well,” says Stewart, who is helping to shield and safeguard today’s young referees (his two sons included) by running a mentoring program in Falmouth and Walpole, Mass.

“People like to affix blame,” Stewart says. “So few recognize the courage it takes to officiate. It’s easier to sit back in the shadows and throw darts.”

George Nevole learned that the hard way. His 10-year-old daughter was brought to tears by insults, swearing and name-calling hurled her dad’s way as she watched him work a Bantam game in Pueblo, Colo.

“I think we need to send the message that we [officials] have families, too,” says Nevole, a 30-year veteran who boasts experience in the East Coast and American hockey leagues. “How would they feel if their kid was watching while they were being abused like that?”

Sadly, officials find themselves unwitting “whipping boys” when fans are actually more frustrated with other aspects of their hockey experience.

“Each of these vocal parents has a story,” Klein says. “Maybe it’s been a tough season for their child or team. Or maybe the game that night is going badly. Or they’ve only won a few games and it’s January.

“Or yes, it could certainly be that the referee just isn’t cutting it that night.”

In 23 years of officiating, including 11 as a Div. I official, J.B. Olson has seen and heard it all.

“I hear a wide variety of comments when I

supervise games, because I’m sitting right there with the fans,” he says.

“I firmly believe the most abuse comes from those who have never played the game or had a very unsatisfying athletic career of some sort. Without a doubt, they are living vicariously through their kid.”

Sporting “an expert’s perspective” from both the bench and the ice, Klein places responsibility on the coach’s shoulders to keep things civil on the bench and on the ice, which will ultimately influence those in the stands.

“I would say that the general conduct of the team starts with the head coach,” he says. “I know. I’ve been there.

“If the coach is in control and in charge, players and parents will follow suit. If the coach feels as if he is a victim, then everyone associated with the team will feel the same way.”

As part of his presentation at USA Hockey officiating seminars, Klein recites the well-worn cliché, “if you don’t have anything positive to say, don’t say anything at all.”

No one is denying referees make mistakes. But as Looker says, “Yelling is not going to help.”

Instead, use the situation as an opportunity for teaching an important life lesson.

“The more that parents realize that their son or daughter is learning life lessons, the better off that person and the sport will be,” Looker says.

“Instead of yelling, maybe the parent should tell the player to deal with adversity. I can see that making any situation a lot better. We are all in this together.”

Matt Nilles is a registered official in Urbana, Ill.