

## **“A Superior Class”? Hockey Moms in Minor Hockey**

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Gender issues often arise in analyses of hockey, regardless of the level of play. Whether the subjects are female cheerleaders or ice cleaners, sports commentators and writers, female fans, or female hockey players themselves, questions inevitably are asked about their contributions to and perceptions of the sport. In the case of cheerleaders and players, for example, discussions of sexuality and behavior appropriateness, respectively, have engendered much discussion and sometimes controversy.

Another group of women who play a significant albeit often overlooked role is the mothers of hockey players. Like many, they are generally relegated to supporter status during serious hockey discussions, as mentioned in many of the essays in this collection. Fathers and /or male coaches, after all, are the ones who most often teach the strategies and skills necessary for a successful hockey career. In our culture, hockey moms are frequently sentimentalized or romanticized: Stompin' Tom Connors has called them “a superior class” and “genuine and persevering people” (Connors). On the other hand, if not fondly regarded, hockey moms are thought of with a certain amount of derision because of their inclusion in the joke told by the infamous Sarah Palin: “What’s the difference between a hockey mom and a pitbull? Lipstick” (Palin). Hockey moms who cheer too loudly or harass a referee during a game seem to be dealt with more harshly in the court of public opinion than hockey dads. Recently much was made of the fact that it was “a hockey mom” in Saskatchewan who was sentenced to two years in jail after being

found guilty of sexual interference of three fourteen year old boys (“Saskatchewan hockey mom sentenced for sexual interference with teen”).

This paper will address “the hockey mom,” examining the role and its myths and realities, but for this examination, only mothers of boys playing hockey will be looked at. This discussion will also include the amount of influence mothers exert over their sons in terms of attitudes towards hockey.

The term “hockey mom” has recently been included in the New Oxford American Dictionary as “a mother who devotes a great deal of time and effort to supporting her children’s participation in ice hockey” (New Oxford Dictionary). This figure, Roy Macgregor observes, remains largely unrecognized:

Hockey mothers are an understudied group when compared to hockey fathers, who are forever being analyzed as the guiding light, the inspiration, at times even the overbearing, even destructive force in a hockey star’s life. Even Wayne Gretzky is too often seen as the creation of the easygoing, decent Walter when common sense argues that Wayne Gretzky did not pop, fully dressed, from a hockey dressing room. (316)

In popular culture, as mentioned previously, sentimentalism, humour, and gratitude characterize the discourse surrounding the hockey mom. Stompin’ Tom Connors sings about the mother who wakes him for an early morning game: “‘Get outta that bed, you sleepy head’, my hockey mom would say, ‘Grab your skates and don’t be late—there’s a hockey game today.’” “Poor old dad” can’t go to the rink with his son so Mom drives there, sympathizes when her son inadvertently scores for the opposing team, cheers him on, and cries in the stands when he eventually finds himself in the Stanley Cup final (Connors). Connors also emphasizes how this unsung heroine puts a great deal of time and energy into her son’s sport with little public acknowledgement. In “In Praise of

Hockey Moms,” MacGregor reinforces these efforts by citing several examples of the tirelessness and devotion of the mothers of professional hockey players. He notes how Jean Béliveau’s mother installed industrial-strength linoleum in her kitchen so her sons could keep their skates on during meals; and he reveals how Gordie Howe’s mother gave him encouragement when his father deemed him “backward” (317).

These themes continue throughout serious and light-hearted discussions of the hockey mom. Richard Harrison has written a poem in tribute to the figure, and in his tribute to his recently deceased mother whom he calls the “consummate hockey mom,” referee Kerry Fraser praises her for her tireless efforts in supporting him during his playing and refereeing careers (Fraser). Like Béliveau’s mother, Barb Fraser went to great lengths to allow her sons to keep their skates on even in their kitchen, and like Katherine Howe, she encouraged him in rough times. He dedicates his article to her but also to “all the ‘Hockey Moms’ that can have a tremendous impact of their children as young athletes and later as contributing adults.” Fraser also notes with affection and humour that he contacted former Toronto Maple Leafs player Pat Stapleton to tell him of his mother’s death. In response to Stapleton’s typical phrase when answering the phone, “Hockey Heaven, St. Peter speaking!” Fraser says, “St. Peter, Kerry Fraser here. I just wanted to inform you that you have a new ‘season ticket’ holder. Barb Fraser has purchased the Eternity Plan!” (Fraser)

Canadian lawyer Catherine Lawrence’s website, *Survival of the Funniest*, includes comical essays about the hockey mother, one of which compares the figure to an animal who is described according to her habitat, food, behaviour, adaptations, and mating rituals. In “Hockey Moms: are they an endangered species?” Lawrence says,

“No matter what the driving conditions (freezing rain, hail, snow, wet and slippery roads) these road-warriors brave them all to get their broods to the battleground” (Lawrence). They eat “Rink Food, a separate category in the Canada Food Guide,” and they “always carry hockey tape, Fabreeze [sic] and a bag of Green Giant frozen peas. You never know what can happen in an arena.” Continuing the metaphor, Lawrence writes that the hockey mom has developed “an ability to endure hard seating in cold arenas,” “expanded peripheral vision to catch offsides,” “expanded vocal chords (and vocabulary) for dealing with questionable refereeing,” and “freeze-dried hair.”

What is the reality of the hockey mom in today’s world? John Misley, vice-president of operations for Hockey Canada, contends that the hockey mother is essential: “I think the role of hockey moms in Canada is huge.... I can see that moms will always go that extra mile for their kids” (Lawrence “The New Rink Rats” 9). To celebrate 2012’s Mother’s Day, CBC Sports asked fans to tweet their fondest memories of their hockey moms who “hold a special place in the world of hockey” (Furlong). Fans who did so expressed immense gratitude for their mothers’ tireless efforts: “My mom took me to every game, every practice, every emergency room trip. She was my number 1 fan.” A Kingston resident writes, “My mom would get up and make me a bowl of maple & brown sugar oatmeal before every single early morning hockey practice.” Justin recalls, “Mom worked, watched us, supported us, bought us hot chocolate, froze, tied our skates ...” (Furlong).

What perhaps distinguishes hockey moms of today from earlier generations is the willingness and ability to speak of their experiences to a larger audience than ever before. Most recently, the Internet and its social networking capabilities have provided a vehicle

for hockey moms to express and celebrate themselves as well as to communicate with each other much more than in previous generations. Pennsylvania's *HockeyMom.com*, "[b]ecause you can never have too many goals in life!" offers advice and encouragement for the busy and often frazzled mother:

If you are a true hockey mom, then you don't have much time for anything else with all the practices, games, and travel time associated with the sport. Unfortunately hockey rinks are not like black holes...life does not stand still while you are there. Who has time for it all? This is where HockeyMom.com comes to the rescue. HockeyMom.com may not be able to help you carry out all your parental and household duties, but we can help with all things hockey. Together we will help reduce the stress of being a hockey mom and you will enjoy the journey along the way. (HockeyMom.com)

The website dispenses advice on a variety of subjects: how to cheer appropriately for one's team; how to help prevent concussions; how to choose hockey equipment. In addition, a discussion board, video section and a Facebook page in which there are more articles and opportunities for further discussion exist.

Perhaps the largest website for Canadian women is *Canadianhockeymoms.ca*, established in February 2010. It describes itself as "[N]urturing Canada's players," and calls its members busy, multi-tasking, and cheerful women who are "early risers," their children's "biggest cheerleader," "counselors," "world class event organizers," "excellent cooks," "real-life bank machines," and "taxi drivers" (*Canadianhockeymoms.ca*). (There is also an accompanying Facebook page, *Hockey Mom in Canada* started by Theresa Dostaler.) The tone of the site is consistently cheerful although there are some articles that bemoan the lack of time from which mothers suffer. The website suggests that the hockey mom of today is perhaps more knowledgeable about and involved in the game than in previous years; the links include Hockey Canada Official Site, hockey

organizations from each province and territory, various types of equipment, advice on how to buy equipment, and fundraising suggestions and advice. In spite of the site's celebration of hockey mothers, several articles admonish some hockey moms not to gloat or celebrate so loudly when one team is trouncing its opposition, and another questions the level of vocal involvement of moms during the games. These mentions of overzealous and domineering mothers suggest that the site acknowledges that not all moms fit the stereotype of the supportive and polite of the female hockey parent.

These websites, blogs, and Facebook pages perhaps indicate a broader role for hockey mothers today. They seem more aware of the science behind the game, and are more likely to celebrate themselves as something besides just parents quietly supporting their children behind the scenes. There is not much discussion of the values they hope to impart to their sons, although the idea of hockey remaining wholesome, friendly, and fun way to exercise is implicit in many of the comments. My recent survey was conducted to seek further information about these aspects of the hockey mom experience. It addresses women with sons playing novice hockey, ages 7-8. Very few respondents had been involved with hockey previously, either as a fan or as a player; however, all the boys had been participating in the sport for three to four years. (All of the following quotations are taken from the results of an anonymous mail-out survey conducted in April 2012.)

### ***Level of Participation***

One subject writes about the extent of her involvement with her son's activity: "I have whole participation in every aspect of his hockey and related activities." Her comment

truly reflects the amount of time and effort that all the hockey moms surveyed expend: most of them attend all games and most practices, often driving their sons to and from the rink, many buy and most manage the equipment, all organize and participate in several fund-raising events every season, and many hold parties for the team throughout the year. Several have also been managers and assistant managers. Most note how time-consuming and expensive they have found hockey to be. The fact that these mothers are so visible in all areas of the game may well positively affect their sons—the former’s constant presence normalizes the idea of women co-existing with men in the world of hockey.

### ***Concerns and Messages***

With so much media attention focused on hockey injuries, all expressed concern about their sons getting hurt and/or getting into fights. Most of these concerns are centered on the higher levels of hockey if they are eventually reached since at the novice level there is relatively little body contact. The respondents have all talked to their sons about playing safely. One mom comments:

When fighting occurs on TV I usually make it clear that I think it’s pointless and takes away from the game. I also make it known that kids involved in the fighting and body checking are more likely to get hurt. ... I have definitely talked to my son about being respectful to fellow players, opponents, and all coaching staff. One team we played was pretty rude... saying “loser” as they shook the hands of our kids. We talked about it afterwards and said that was definitely not acceptable.

Teamwork, fair play, hard work, friendship-building and respect for all are goals that the respondents encourage their sons to achieve. None of the moms see the NHL in their sons’ futures, although one hopes for a hockey scholarship to a good university in several

years. What the parents seem to appreciate most about hockey is that at its best it provides exercise, promotes comradeship, and instills self-confidence. The lessons learned through hockey, the mothers hope, will be invaluable in other aspects of their children's lives now and in the future. Hockey itself is less important than the lessons it ideally teaches.

### ***Mothers and Fathers***

Every respondent insists that mothers and fathers are equally important influences on their children, although in different ways. "Although I don't talk strategy or skill, I motivate my son to do his best, follow a goal or feeling, and support his accomplishments or failures," says one parent. Another believes that currently both she and her husband affect their son's attitudes towards hockey, but worries that this may change as the player gets older and winning becomes more of an emphasis. Mostly all respondents feel that fathers stress winning more so than they do. At this stage, however, they see great value in moms and dads complementing each other:

Mothers can offer a balance to how hockey life can be approached. Many fathers tend to be more intense about their sons' hockey careers and apply more pressure to perform than moms. Moms can often counter that kind of intensity through logic, reasoning, and nurturing. Moms give the message that hockey is for your enjoyment and ours; if you don't make the NHL, we love you anyways!

It would be interesting to look at the young hockey players in a few years to see if much influence from their mothers has remained.

### ***Being a hockey mom***

Michelle Giacometti, hockey mom and manager of an atom team emphasizes the lessons and attributes gained through a sport: “My boys get so much more out of hockey than just hockey skills. They are learning about life and I love to see them so involved” (Lawrence “The New Rink Rats” 9). Similarly, all of the respondents in my survey take pride in being “hockey moms,” although they find working both outside and inside the home while taking care of their children’s other activities tiring. Several mentioned that being a hockey mom is much easier when the father is involved in the sport as well. All the mothers surveyed comment that they are treated very well by the coaches and fathers—they don’t feel that they are second class citizens at the rink in any way. To several mothers, hockey is secondary to their children’s experience:

To me, it’s not even about the sport of hockey; it’s about watching my boys have fun. I enjoy watching them grow and develop skills and feel proud of a job well done. I have enjoyed the social aspect of being a hockey mom as well. I have made connections with other parents with common goals and values for a life dedicated to the well-being of their children.

Another writes,

I don’t actually like the term ‘hockey mom’ much—it’s yet another label. I’m a mom who tries hard to afford her kid whatever opportunities he wishes to pursue. If it’s hockey—great. If it’s soccer, or ballet, or playing saxophone—equally great. This pursuit is about him finding stuff to do that is fun, productive, interesting.

None of the women interviewed feel that being a hockey mom is a major part of their identity; there are many other aspects of their lives that define them. In April of this year Hockey Canada tried to organize a celebratory brunch for hockey moms in Calgary, which it described as a kind of thank you for all the women’s efforts:

This three hour brunch will celebrate all the local moms who continue to support their family's passion and love for hockey. Somehow the young hockey stars arrive at practices, games and tournaments promptly and safely, car pools arranged, cheering section secured and equipment updated and replaced as required. The "angels" who do this are truly the unsung heroes of "the game" ("Salute to Hockey Moms.")

However, the event was cancelled due to lack of ticket sales. Although it promised prizes, celebrity guests, and a fashion show, it clearly did not entice a lot of hockey moms into finding out who would receive the awards for "best baker," "most insanely glamorous" or "best taxi Mom."

In the end, the survey and the closer look at the "hockey mom" did not result in any surprising or provocative findings. Today women are still somewhat behind the scenes; however, they are making their presence known more vocally through social media, which also helps them to connect with others for advice and encouragement. The number of tasks hockey moms complete range from physically readying their children for the game to emotionally supporting them. The majority of hockey moms have a strong sense of humour; perhaps that helps them juggle their many tasks and roles. Certainly minor hockey would not flourish without the help of these mothers, so in this sense they are indeed a "superior class." As one mom observes, "So many moms take their kids to hockey and help fundraise, etc. I just don't think it would be possible or there would be way [less] kids in hockey if it wasn't for hockey moms!" That hockey mothers nurture, support, guide, and teach to such degrees speaks volumes about the important contribution hockey moms make to Canada's national sport.

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