

INTERVIEW WITH WAYNE GRETZKY

THIS PIECE STARTED OUT AS SOMETHING ABOUT HOCKEY PARENTS BUT IT'S BECOME PRETTY MUCH THE PATRICK O'SULLIVAN STORY - AND YOU KNOW WHY. CLEARLY IT'S VERY IMPORTANT TO HIM THAT ON THE DAY OF THE DRAFT, YOU WENT UP TO HIM AND SAID LOOK, IT'S GOING TO BE OKAY. WHY DID YOU DO THAT?

Well a couple of reasons. One, 95% sort of kids who grow up, have great parents. They support them, they support the coaches, they support the other kids on the team. And I was one of those 95%. I had great parents who were wonderful and supported it tremendously. The other side of it, you have about 5% of parents on every team, every league, whether it's baseball, basketball, hockey, who are those so-called sort of troublemakers, who are hard on the individual kids and more importantly, hard on coaches and hard on the other players. I left home at 14 because of it. It wasn't pretty and it wasn't fun. And I look back at my life and I wish I didn't have to move away from home at such a young age. I was penalized for a) being a pretty good player and b) because of envy-ism and jealousy from parents. And here comes a kid along that obviously has had a tough upbringing. His dad probably took it too far, in the sense that he cared too much, and he went overboard. And I just wanted to be able to say to him, look, you know, what you're doing is better than anyone else. You've stood up not only for other kids who are being physically and mentally abused, but you've stood up for yourself, and I wanted to go over and shake his hand. He's had a tough time and it's good to see a good guy come out of this and hopefully do well.

HAD YOU BEEN AWARE OF HIS STORY FOR SOME TIME ?

I hadn't. About a month before the draft, I read the story. I think it was in ESPN in the magazine, and it was overwhelming. I mean I just – we think that those things don't go on in this day and age. It hasn't changed since the day I left home at 14. And we get so caught up, I guess as parents, that we want our kids to be so successful. And as I said, his dad's probably guilty of caring too much and he took it overboard and consequently the boy not only suffered in his hockey, but more importantly, he suffered in his life.

DO YOU BELIEVE THAT - THAT HURT PATRICK AT THE NHL DRAFT THIS PAST YEAR?

No I don't believe so because I come from a hockey organization, the Phoenix Coyotes, and in this day and age, there's so many background checks that done on kids, the families, their education. The only X's you really get is if you're a bad person. If you're addicted to something, if you're not a dedicated player, if you're not a hard worker. If you go through a tough tie from parenthood, if you go through a tough time with coaches, scouts and management seem to pull for you and want you to be drafted and want you to do well. So that really isn't something the NHL looks at as a whole. And I can't speak for every other team, but for our team, the only x would be if the person was a bad person himself.

DO YOU RECALL YOUR EXACT WORDS TO HIM THAT EVENING?

I just went over to him and told him, you know, this is a compelling story. And not only is it a great story for him to tell, but hopefully it's going to help other kids. And I shook his hand and I wished him good luck. I didn't know he was going to defeat Canada at the World Juniors. But he maybe took that good luck a step too far.

DESCRIBE HIM AS A PLAYER.

Well, from what people tell me, he's just a hard worker. He's a guy that loves to play hockey, fights through everything. And obviously his sanctuary is on the ice. What he had to go through off the ice, I don't think anybody can relate to.

WELL PERHAPS IF ANYONE CAN, YOU CAN.

Well, but I was lucky because on the inside, I always had my parents to fall back on. If I found things were difficult and I was down or disappointed in what had happened, I could always lean on my parents' support, which was 24\7. He had nowhere to go to, and I think probably – I don't know for sure, but I think probably there was people that didn't believe him at the beginning, that it was that bad or that difficult. And so now only is he fighting that demon of competing and looking for guidance from his father, he's having to really tell people, hey, this is difficult and I'm going through a tough time. And sometimes we're not always believers when somebody's crying for help. And I think that was probably more difficult than anything for him.

AS YOU SAY, THIS IS NOT A NEW PHENOMENON.

No.

YOU EXPERIENCED IT.

Yeah, it's sad.

TWENTY YEARS AGO. WHAT'S THE ANSWER TO IT THEN?

I don't have an answer. I see it with my kids now. I go to my kids' games. It hasn't changed. Parents get heavily involved. And maybe it's worse now because when we grew up or when I grew up, the theory was, I want you to go to school, I want you to get an education, I don't want you to play sports, in that order. There's so much money now in professional sports that now parents are saying, I want my son to be a professional athlete and then go to school. It's changed. And so consequently, there's more pressure on the parents, put out a lot of money. There's more pressure on the son who doesn't want to fail their mum and dad. And I don't know what the right answer is. I really think – and I'm not a believer that you drop your kid off at sports and say okay, I'll pick you up in two hours. Up until my last game that I played for the New York Rangers, it was always the greatest thrill or the greatest feeling in the world to look up in the stands and see your mum and dad at a practice, see your mum and dad at a game. Then as you grow older and you get married, to look up and see your wife there, see your kids there. That's what it's all about. And so

I'm not a believer that you drop your kids off and walk away. We just as parents, some parents, I don't think we're ever going to get over this, some parents are just very demanding. They want, they think that their sons are going to make professional sports. I was telling a friend the other day, taking me aside, and where I live, take me out of the equation and the people I know, the athletes that I know, I was saying to a friend, do you know anybody that is a professional athlete, and they said no. And that's how difficult it is to become a professional athlete. Only the elite best make the National Hockey League, only the best make pro tennis, pro golf. It's very difficult to be a professional athlete. What kids should be thinking is, and parents should be thinking, I want my kids to get an education and I want them to do well in sports. And hopefully they can get a college scholarship out of it because then you're conquering both worlds. You're getting an education out of it and you're furthering your professional career, and that's what parents – that's what their goal should be for kids who are 11 and 12 years old.

WHAT'S INTERESTING IN DOING THIS - THE PARENTS WHO WERE OBVIOUSLY PUTTING THAT INORDINATE PRESSURE ON THEIR KIDS ARE PARENTS WHO, IT SEEMS TO ME GENERALIZING, HAVE NOT SEEN THIS SPORT FROM THE HIGHER LEVELS. THE PEOPLE WHO ARE SAYING - LOOK, LET THE KIDS JUST PLAY - ARE WAYNE GRETZKY AND MOE MANTHA AND GUYS WHO HAVE SEEN IT FROM THE NHL.

Yeah. Well, 95% of the parents are great, and that's what's sad about it. We only have a handful of parents across the nation that seem to be or seem to ruin it for all these other great parents. There's so many wonderful parents who pick up 3 or 4 kids, take them to practice. Parents who financially support 2 or 3 other kids on the team, so they can play, and take them to games and practices. So we have so many wonderful parents. And it's unfortunate that a handful ruin it for everyone else. They seem to get all the exposure and all the publicity. But as you said, I guess most parents live their lives through their kids. Hey listen, my dad wanted to be an NHL player and he didn't make it. He saw I had potential and there's no question, he lived a lot of life through me. He loved it and enjoyed it and he didn't make the NHL, but I did. I still always tease him when he tells me about something. I always remind him, how many goals did you get in the NHL? You know, so that's never going to change. But the other side of it is I had brothers who didn't make pro hockey, who kicked around in the east coast league and kicked around in the American league. It's not a great life. It's very difficult. And only a select few make it. And so I guess from our point of view, when we've lived it, we know how difficult it is to get there and we know the tough roads that some kids have to follow in order to make it, and some of those roads aren't very pretty.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH.