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More important than a game: Coach's gesture touches injured referee

Posted by Matt Rocheleau January 16, 2011 11:07 AM

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(Courtesy: Catholic Memorial)

Catholic Memorial JV hockey coach John Huether (center, above the man in the Atlanta Braves hat) tended to injured referee Richard Sweeney at a recent game. Sweeney said Huether went "above and beyond;" Huether thinks nothing of it. This photo is from last season.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Ask high school hockey coach John Huether what he did last Sunday, and he'll shrug it off.

"It was no big deal," he'll say.

Ask referee Richard Sweeney the same question, and he'll tell you Huether's actions, which brought tears to his eyes then, were the "ultimate sign of respect and sportsmanship" – the kind of sportsmanship that still goes on, but both men agreed is often overshadowed by headline-grabbing tales of overly-competitive youth- and high school-level coaches, parents, players, or a combination of them all letting tempers get the better of them.

At a junior varsity game last Sunday morning between rivals Catholic

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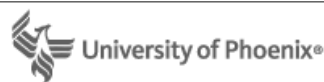
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Memorial and Xaverian High School, Sweeney, one of two referees at the game, dropped the puck for an early third-period faceoff to the right of CM's goaltender.

As Sweeney back-skated out of the faceoff circle, his skates came out from under him – likely from a piece of tape used on a player's equipment found on the ice afterward – and his head sharply struck the frozen ice surface knocking him unconscious.

Coach Huether, a nurse, immediately hopped over the wall in front of his team's bench and onto the ice to tend to Sweeney.

Neither man had met the other – or if they had, neither remembered – before that day.

For a brief, but scary moment, Sweeney was out, motionless and unresponsive. After the official came to, Huether, who was joined shortly after by Susan Haggerty, the mother of a Xaverian player and also a nurse, began to perform a series of simple neurological tests to measure the extent of Sweeney's concussion.

The eyes of the 51-year-old attorney, a Dorchester native who now lives in Westwood, weren't dilating properly and he couldn't follow Huether's fingers as the coach moved them several inches away from Sweeney's face. He didn't know what day it was, couldn't immediately remember his phone number to notify family, and for several minutes had to remain laying on the ice as his legs wouldn't hold him to stand.

Eventually, two players helped escort Sweeney off the ice and brought him to an area in the stands to rest.

This is when, as Sweeney said, the 46-year-old coach and West Roxbury resident began a series of actions that went above and beyond what he's ever seen in his 40-plus years playing, coaching and officiating youth- and high school-level ice hockey.

"I fully expected to be helped off the ice and have everyone go back to hockey," Sweeney recalled.

But Huether, the varsity hockey captain at Catholic Memorial in 1982 who has been coaching hockey for over a decade, and Haggerty stayed by Sweeney's side in the stands – causing the game to be put on hold – until an ambulance arrived.

"I said, 'Go back to coach your team.' He told me, 'you're more important than the game.'"

As Sweeney was helped to walk to the locker room on the opposite side from where he had been seated in the stands, Huether told players from both sides to tap their sticks on the glass as Sweeney made his exit. No player hesitated to do what Huether asked, and crowd applause followed.

"I was so touched by that. To me, that was an ultimate sign of respect. It hit me right then and there, and I honestly had tears in my eyes," said Sweeney Thursday while driving home from a follow-up doctor's visit for his periodic post-concussion headaches and blurred vision.

At the game's conclusion, Huether was worried Sweeney still hadn't been able

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to recall his own phone number so hospital officials could notify the injured referee's family.

Huether tried to contact league officials to check on whether they knew who he was or if they had news on his status, but to no avail.

Not realizing there was a hospital a few minutes down the road in Milton, Huether drove about 15 minutes to Quincy Medical Center where no one had been admitted for a hockey-related head injury. He was told to check Milton Hospital instead.

So, he drove back the way he had already journeyed immediately after the game.

When Huether arrived at the hospital and learned the referee was undergoing procedural, post-concussion neurological exams there, he found Sweeney's 20-year-old son, Brendan, 25-year-old daughter, Jen, and her husband in the emergency room waiting area. Neither of Sweeney's children had seen their father since the injury, and they did not have a clear story as to what had happened or what his condition was.

Sweeney, who was a Boston police officer for 13 years before retiring in 1996, suffered a serious neck injury when he had a seizure and fell into a construction pit while on detail duty in 1988 that resulted in a 18 months of out-patient care and a titanium disk being implanted in his neck.

Thus, while sitting in the waiting room Sunday afternoon, his children had been concerned that he may have reinjured his neck.

Huether reassured them that their father would be alright. He stayed with Brendan and Jen for around two hours chatting lightly with each and swapping hockey stories with Sweeney's son who used to play for Xaverian.

When Sweeney and his wife, Terri, also a nurse, returned to the waiting room, the referee, shocked to see Huether there hugged the coach.

"When I finally walked out, who's sitting there but him with my two kids," Sweeney said. "I was a little choked up that he had been so good to me and my family and what he did for my kids was something I've never seen before."

"He didn't even know me. It's not like we're buddies or I've reffed a bunch of his games or anything. And when you look at what he did, most of it went unnoticed ... If this ends up being the last hockey game I referee, it will be a memorable one," added Sweeney, who has been advised by doctors to not referee for at least three weeks.

The coach, however, still thinks nothing of what he did.

"I think it just has to do with the fact that I'm a nurse. We're trained to take care of the patient and their family; it's in the curriculum," said Huether, who is pursuing a master's in nursing. "As a nurse, ethically, I have an obligation to stay with anyone who is hurt ... I was just doing what you're supposed to do when someone gets hurt. No big deal."

"Referees are always helping out players when they get hurt," he continued in a phone interview Friday. "I'm sure he's doing this type of thing as much as anyone."

The two have not spoken since Sunday because neither had the other's contact information, but both men said they hope to talk soon. Sweeney plans to thank Huether in person at an upcoming game.

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The referee also sent e-mail Monday to Catholic Memorial officials hoping it would make its way to Huether, which it eventually did, and also passed some other league officials on the way.

"Your actions are an embodiment of the brotherhood that makes high school hockey such a meaningful experience for the young people who participate," wrote Paul Spear, Massachusetts State Hockey Coaches Association, in an e-mail.

Catholic Conference Ice Hockey Commissioner Jim Doyle was also impressed.

"It proves once again sportsmanship is both on & off the ice," he e-mailed. "In today's arena this kind of behavior is rarely present and never exemplified."

Stories of high school and youth coaches, parents and players becoming verbally and physically violent at athletic events tend to garner the most public interest and media attention.

"There's life lessons to be learned in hockey an every sport, but sometimes people get too wrapped up in the competition and forget that," said Huether.

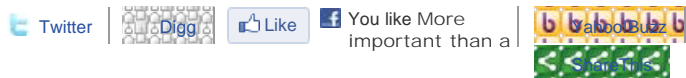
Of his actions Sunday, he said, "that's the way I was taught to play the game. You play it hard and play it with ferocity and competitively, but you have to respect your opponent and the officials. At the end of the game you touch gloves with everyone, and that's it. I just hope the players learn something from this. As coaches, we're always teaching. We just don't always know when we are."

When Sweeney had regained consciousness while lying on the ice, he continuously insisted he was OK and tried a few times to stand on his own. He said he felt bad for delaying the game and was embarrassed.

Now, it's Huether who said he's embarrassed by the attention he's receiving from Sweeney's thank-you e-mail.

"They're kind of making a big deal out of nothing," he said.

E-mail Matt Rocheleau at mjrochele@gmail.com.



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