

FEATURE

HOMETOWN HOCKEY WILL CONTINUE TO LIFT, PUSH CANADIANS

BY RON MACLEAN ON NOV 20 2016

"The psychology of the underdog starts in the off-season"

-Gino Arcaro

In the days leading up to our third season of Rogers Hometown Hockey I have had that line ricocheting inside my head and my home as a result of my Rio Olympics and Tragically Hip hangovers.

Gino Arcaro is a football coach and fitness centre owner in southern Ontario. He authored one of my favourite books, "Soul of a Lifter." He teaches that making oneself better starts with strength and conditioning. It's where I am in advance of the new season. Tora Slone's over in her gym, like me, and like Gord Downie, we're still pushing. The weight room: a place of incredible anticipation

We will need to be strong for the sheer volume of travel, but more than that, to honour the opportunity our team has been given. We are about to launch another journey into Canada's most universal arena, the rink. We will reveal the faces behind the heart and soul of the game.

We open in Connor McDavid's hometown of Newmarket, ON, where I used to referee Junior A Ontario Hockey Association games.

Charlie Macoun was the man who ran the club back then. His son Jamie was a Stanley Cup-winning defenceman with the Calgary Flames. I would pick Charlie's brain for ways to make connections with the kids I was reffing, to the NHL players I would be interviewing, and to the audiences I would be working for as a ref, and with, as a performer on Hockey Night in Canada.

Next, we will hit Saint John, N.B. where I once sat in the office of legendary mayor, Elsie Wayne. I ask Elsie for ways to handle Don Cherry. She knew. I keep thinking of the mentors I will get to see as we hopscotch across the country. **At the risk of getting too heavy, I realize again what I believe to be the true gift of our show: soul-lifting.**

We are about to learn about Canada through the ideas and stories of Canadians. Last year I stood in the penalty time-keeper's box in Swift Current as Sheldon Kennedy was about to step back onto the ice for the first time since he played there. I was looking at Sheldon as he was about to confront the place where he had been sexually abused.

He whispered, "I wish I could have loved the game when I played. Joe Sakic and I used to light up this barn."

Then, he stepped into a thunderous ovation. I thought about where Sheldon would be without Wayne McNeil, the man who with Sheldon created Respect Group.

Wayne carried Sheldon, and in turn, Sheldon listed us. Sheldon visited our show and taught us about the various silos of hell: mental illness, addiction, incarceration, sexual abuse and how they are all related to trauma.

In Grande Prairie, AB, Clint Malarchuk joined us to discuss his book, "The Crazy Game." It chronicles Clint's battles with various illnesses, including addiction. As we went to air with our first chat with Clint, I could see a cowboy had stepped into our mobile studio. He was silhouetted in the television lights behind the camera near a doorway that was fighting to seal off a minus 40-degree Celsius wind chill.

The cowboy was 12-time World Champion chuckwagon racer Kelly Sutherland. A recovering alcoholic, Kelly came out on the coldest night of the year to be here for Clint.

I cry just writing about it.

In Whitehorse, we spoke with Chase Blodgett, a transgender man living in Yukon.

He taught us it's who you go to bed as, not with. In Calgary, we celebrated the Calgary Inferno's Clarkson Cup championship, and we aired the inspiring story of Brigitte Lacquette and her First Nations family in Mallard, MB.

Over and over, we see hockey-inspired stories of how we as individuals represent ourselves. It does not use race or gender as validation for individual liberty.

Diversity and pluralism are not synonymous. Pluralism joins a common society with give and take, with shared understandings and differences. The historical world-wide response to diversity has been exclusion or assimilation, and we have struggled in Canada too.

If you watched The Hip's final show in Kingston, you heard Gord Downie lament that cultural tendency to place sections of society into one party or one interest group, tending to see them as a risk to be borne by taxpayers in general.

"Tending."

Gord Downie knows. His tour reminds me of ours. Not because we plan it this way, but because on Rogers Hometown Hockey you will stroll into the solidarity hockey has built. The dressing rooms are for us all. The closer you look, the greater conversation is made real by the comfort hockey affords.

At the Rio Olympics, I was asked to stick around the International Broadcasting Center one day after I had wrapped up an Olympic Morning Show. The Oleksiak family were coming to the CBC compound and had asked if they could meet with me.

As you know, 16-year-old swimming sensation Penny Oleksiak won four medals and carried the Canadian flag in the closing ceremony. During our meeting, Penny's mother Alison said she had asked to meet with me to extend a thank you for the show. Not the Olympic broadcast, but rather, Hometown Hockey. Alison pointed out how she was raised in Scotland, and her husband Richard grew up in the U.S.

She thanked us for teaching them about Canada. And so we feel an opportunity. You are not the sole lifter in your life.

There are fellow Canadians waiting to spot you. Let us take you on a road trip that will subtly transform, nourish you the way only the good ol' game can, and is sure to keep you pushing.