

Tough Times!

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By Paul Wylie



Times are tough. There are lots of changing dynamics in our profession and there is more pressure than ever to make ends meet. Rinks are closing, skaters are cutting back, learn-to-skate numbers are off. “Do more with less” seems to be the new mantra throughout our society, and it seems every time we turn around there’s more bad news about the economy. Fear of the future is rampant, so who can blame anyone for looking out for #1? When faced with desperate circumstances, I believe what we choose to do and say speaks volumes about who we are deep inside, and the stories we respond to tell us about who we would like to be.

One of my favorite stories is *Cinderella Man*. It is a movie in which Russell Crowe portrays James J. Braddock, a boxer in the Great Depression. Braddock has had a solid career as a boxer, but he becomes unfairly excluded from championship bouts by promoters, sending his family into deep financial crisis. Forced to scrimp on food and training, he struggles to support his family as a day worker on the docks, just hoping for a job to feed his family and keep heat on in his tenement. In the midst of being down and out, his son steals a loaf of bread from the corner baker. Instead of justifying his son’s actions because of the family’s dire circumstances, Braddock takes him back to the store and makes him apologize and repay the store owner for the bread. He teaches his son that no matter how bad it gets, stealing is not an option. Later in the movie, he takes unemployment money from the government because he himself gets so desperate, but his agent (who is also not immune to the economic downturn) gets him a fight that revitalizes his career. Once he turns his career around, he pays back the government for the hand-out he had received!

Albeit exaggerated by the screenwriter for dramatic effect, the story is a true one, and instructive for our times. What’s most important is how we feel deep down about Crowe’s character. We admire his perseverance

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and his integrity. We want our children to follow his example and to be upright in character. We want to be the guy who gives up his pre-fight meal so our son or daughter has the last piece of the pork chop. We are the ones crying in the end when he beats the cocky showboat, Max Baer, who disrespected him (and his wife) in front of the media. Braddock represents what Abraham Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature." It is the way he responds to adversity that inspires us. Given the circumstances that were sure excuses for bad behavior, he instead chooses to suffer a little, instead of losing his integrity. He eventually wins and it's a happy ending, but what if it weren't? I still would want to teach my son and daughters to be like him, rather than cut corners as many did in that era (and will do in ours).



What can we do to daily live out our best intentions? Obviously, we need to follow the rules and codes of conduct of our profession. We must adhere to a minimum standard of ethics: Don't solicit students, don't tamper, don't lie about our accomplishments, remain appropriate in all areas of our physical behavior, etc. The "gross infractions" are areas where few of us will fall, yet what is

our part in establishing the healthiest environment for our rinks, making them places where the minimum requirements are not just met, but surpassed with excellence? What can we do to ensure an environment where coaches, skaters, parents and management are not merely civil to each other, but supportive, even edifying to one another, creating a positive, constructive place to work and to train?

To me, the battleground of ethics comes down to the gray areas. Gossip, back-biting, subtle criticisms of other coaches or skaters whispered in a quiet corner, resume embellishment, resisting cooperation with others, playing politics with solos in the club show or cutting the music line (sorry everyone, I did that too!) But you might say, why's that so big a deal? A small comment about another coach, a skater or a parent--isn't gossip a part of every rink, part of human communication? This is just one area where we can be true leaders, bringing

light into the rinks where we teach. We actually have a choice with every word and every facial expression. The responsibility is this: we are creating memories every time we enter the rink, and our small contribution to the atmosphere is like our "emotional footprint." Kindness, integrity, peacemaking, handling situations with class, these are timeless qualities that result in a difference that can be tangibly felt in an arena, even if the individual incidences are subtle and small.

The difference little things can make on our ethical decisions reminds me of the way William Bratton, Chief of Police in New York City finally dealt with rampant crime in New York City. From the Tipping Point by Malcom Gladwell, we learn that if there was graffiti, if there were cracked windows, if shops were broken into, Bratton's department chased down every incident. The small incidents were not small, because they led to the overall corruption of a city, and a self-image that was dirty, dangerous and broken. That environment bred more crime. When the broken windows were fixed, graffiti erased, and small-time crime treated as a serious offense, the incidents of vandalism and petty theft decreased, but so did the incidents of rape, armed robbery and murder. It may not be that your rink has a problem with solicitation or inappropriate behavior, but are there damaging words spoken in the pro room or behind others' backs that you wouldn't be comfortable hearing in front of another person? Stand up to yourself and others and say you won't be a part of it. Are situations manipulated to make one person look good and another foolish? Walk away from that, either in yourself, or others. Is there just a little poison in the air that could affect the overall environment? Ghandi said, "Be the change you want to see in the world."

Let's make it a goal to live the life of the hero in our rinks. Don't just stop at the edge of the rules. Become the person in the rink people love and trust because you are genuinely kind and they never hear you gossip or back-bite. When times are difficult, who we are is really tested, so let's try to become the person that makes everyone cry in the end when you triumph.

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