

BROCK'S BANTER: Lighting a Spark

By Brock Weir

My parents can never be criticized for their lack of persistence.

When they set their minds to do something, they were ? and, sometimes, still are ? almost single-mindedly determined to make it happen.

But, sometimes, despite their best efforts, the raw material just isn't there.

Case in point: me.

Despite the obvious roadblocks in their way ? you know, things like aptitude and interest ? they were determined to turn me into an athlete.

Oh, how they tried.

From the time I was old enough for school, my first day camp over the summer holidays was spent at a sports camp run by a now defunct area golf course.

Sure, there were some arts and crafts involved, an activity that was more my speed, but most of the rest of time was consumed by golf, tennis and squash.

Truth be told, I couldn't have cared less. The only pleasant memories I had of the experience were, during lunch time, watching the instructors dole out our lunches and pour ketchup on our plates from a crystal flower vase. Yes, apparently it was a fancy establishment.

When that didn't work, my next few summers were spent at another sports camp run by a local private school. This place tried to be deceptive with their plans, camouflaging their true intentions by wrapping everything up in a J.R.R. Tolkien theme, but the truth was soon revealed. Outside of the few moments we spent hearing (endlessly) about the Hobbit and making Lord of the Rings-related widgets out of papier mâché, we were put through our paces on the soccer field, the baseball diamond and, horror of horrors, the track.

Despite my natural aversion to most things athletic, I persevered at this place for four consecutive summers. If it wasn't for the good company I enjoyed at the camp, to this day I would be convinced I stuck it out just out of spite.

But, all good things had to come to an end and I rounded out my summer day camp career at yet another sports camp, which divided its time with days split between a golf course and a tennis club.

Truth be told, it was here I was introduced to tennis, the only sport in which I actually enjoy participating; I still don't personally see the point in grabbing a stick, thwacking a ball, and chasing it into a hole in the ground.

That being said, however, I was not fully immune to the joys of sport.

Back in elementary school, I became fast friends with one of my peers who happened to have special needs. His life was sometimes a challenge and I was intrigued by how he shouldered it all while maintaining that elusive spark of joy, I began talking with him to find out more.

Our friendship blossomed to the extent that when he was selected by the Special Olympics to go to the Regional meet, he asked if I could be one of the volunteers to go along and help the school's team.

Given my own track record, I was dubious as to how much help I could actually be in this endeavour, but friendship eventually won the day and we set out on the bus to Whitchurch-Stouffville.

What I saw was transformative.

I was met by a friend who was in his element, excelling in ways he hadn't been able to experience within the confines of our school, and making it to the podium several times. When one track event came around in which he needed my assistance, I thought it was going to be a disaster. Somehow, and I'm sure I was no help whatsoever, he placed second and the joy was overwhelming not only to witness but also be a part of. Not only was the joy overwhelming, but so was the sense and look of achievement that I had never seen before.

Fortunately, I have had many more opportunities since.

On the subject of joy, it rubs off on you. In this line of work, I have had many opportunities to cover Special Olympics-related events, whether they are athletic competitions themselves, fundraising events, or special outreach campaigns, and there hasn't been one yet that hasn't made me feel at least some of those feelings I had on that unlikely day in Whitchurch-Stouffville.

The mission of Special Olympics is simple: enriching the lives of Canadians with an intellectual disability through sport.

But, if you've been involved with the organization, whether as an athlete, parent, volunteer, fundraiser, or even a fan, you know that it is so much more.

As they say, every cloud has its silver lining and it has been heartening in recent days to hear the passionate outcry that has been taking place south of our border over the threatened cut of federal funding to Special Olympics programming in the country that started it all.

U.S. Education

Secretary Betsy DeVos defended her recommendation to slash her government's funding of the Special Olympics completely by arguing that as Special Olympics is, at the end of the day, a private organization, they can adequately raise funds for themselves.

Naturally, the response was swift and to the point.

Although her recommendations had little chance of coming into law due to the balance of power, the outcry and reasoned arguments that ensued seemed to have struck a chord in the heart of a place where reason seems to matter less and less.

Thankfully, here at home, there is more of a buy-in from our lawmakers, and this buy-in is so essential; it's a vote of confidence and a shot-in-the-arm for athletes and volunteers who really need it because everyone who gets involved learns so much in the process.

While fundraising is indeed a vote of confidence and a good shot in the arm, so too is active participation from this community.

The power of a cheering section, or even an individual cheerleader, can't be underestimated.

If you want to experience some joy, and get a reminder of what truly matters, look up the Special Olympics sport of your choice and come out to cheer on the participants.

If you don't, you might never know the spark it could light within you.