

BROCK'S BANTER: The luxury of taking a knee?

By Brock Weir

One would think there are bigger fish to fry.

In the middle of large swaths of his country clamoring to clean up and rebuild after a series of devastating hurricanes, in the height of ever-climbing heights of tension between the United States and North Korea, and the continuing focus of the Russia investigation, it seems the biggest thing on the American President's mind this past weekend was payroll within the National Football League.

That is, of course, by design.

He was running his ever-flapping mouth on players who have opted to kneel during the Star-Spangled Banner, rather than snap to attention, as a peaceful sign of protest for innumerable inequities within their society.

Apparently, protesting his policies and the bigoted treatment so many in the United States experience from persons in authority is a direct slight against the very country they whole dear, against patriotism, and their celebrated flag.

Well, of course it isn't, but it serves a vital purpose in his narrative, diminishes the message the players are trying to send, and, most importantly, provides a convenient distraction to the President's growing list of shortcomings.

To that end, it was certainly mission accomplished as that is all some people had the wherewithal to jabber on about breathlessly throughout the end of last week but, unfortunately, it has also served to draw attention away from the work of true patriots.

On Saturday evening, I attended the opening ceremonies of the Invictus Games at the Air Canada Centre.

An initiative led by Prince Harry, Invictus is an international sporting event exclusively for servicemen and servicewomen around the world who have returned from their missions wounded, injured or otherwise adversely affected, including suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

After its first outing in the United Kingdom two years ago, it took place last year in Florida before arriving in Toronto this past week, after which it will take shape once again in 2018 in Australia.

We had a perfect view of the street from the 300-level of the ACC before the festivities as thousands of supporters, many donning the uniforms and/or national colours of the country they supported lined the avenue to cheer the athletes as they made their way into the arena.

The atmosphere was electric as men and women alighted from their bus, some in wheelchairs, others using artificial limbs and still more whom, to outward appearances, appeared to be relatively able bodied but carried experiences with them that we can barely begin to imagine.

This electricity carried on into the arena as thousands more settled into their seats eager to cheer on the parade of athletes alongside Prince Harry, Governor General David Johnston and his wife, Dr. Sharon Johnston, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Sophie Gregoire Trudeau, First Lady Melania Trump, Premier Kathleen Wynne and dignitaries from across the country and around the world.

Throughout the presentation, the audience was introduced to a number of heroes, each with their own personal stories of heroism, heartbreak, and herculean effort to reclaim their lives.

One such individual was Captain Trevor Green, a veteran from the Afghanistan front who bravely fought back from the brink of death after being attacked with an axe wielded by a Taliban insurgent when he took off his helmet as a mark of respect to a tribal elder.

'I'd wager none of us expected to be here, expected to seem this broken, and we all thought it would be someone down the like who got hit or stepped on the IED,' Captain Green told audiences. 'I know that I did. So, when my platoon got blown up in my third week in the theatre, I thought it was my silver bullet. By surviving enemy's most dangerous weapon, I came through the war with just a concussion and whiplash. Two weeks later the axe came down.

'When I got home, my docs took one look at me and said if I lived, which they doubted, I would be a vegetable for the rest of my life. They told my wife Debbie to stick me in a home somewhere and get on with her life. My army brothers fought for me against all odds. They believed in me in the fight and they still do.

'I had the choice to accept the prognosis or just give up, or to fight like a soldier. When I came out of my coma, I thought I was just taking a break from fighting to get over a head wound. I was crushed when I learned the truth.'

After a year in a Vancouver hospital, he was subsequently transferred to an Alberta rehab clinic specializing in brain injuries. It was there, he says, that 'the black dog of PTSD started growling' and he suffered a major setback on the road to recovery. But, like so many of the hundreds of athletes marching into the Air Canada Centre on Saturday night, on foot, on prosthetic, or on wheels, he

persevered.

'I chose to be captain of my destiny, master of my fate,' he concluded. 'All of you were faced with the same choice and you all made the same decision. You chose to believe in yourself and I am proud of you.'

As I listened to his wise words, the inspirational speeches from individuals such as Rick Hansen, Canada's Man in Motion, and the fiery pep talk from Prince Harry itself, it seemed that a large segment of athletes sitting proudly in front of the stage were facing another challenge.

For the American athletes, who were in pride of place over the weekend, sitting stage right, proudly bearing narrower renderings of their flag's 'broad stripes', they would be returning home to a land of division, with their efforts in the theatre being coopted as defending a flag rather than defending hard-fought freedoms.

Over the course of this manufactured controversy, scores of American veterans took to social media reiterating their view that they risked their lives to fight for the freedom for individuals to protest peacefully in their country 'even if it is 'taking a knee.'

As I looked out onto the floor of the ACC to see people who actually stepped up for the cause of freedom, I couldn't help but think that for so many of them the physical act of 'taking a knee' was now, sadly, something of a luxury or, at worst, impossibility.

But would they do it again? Probably. And we should all turn our attention to these everyday heroes rather than partisan, squawking distractions.