

Up close and personal

By Tony Pearson

(WARNING: For those not into sports, this column is about hockey. But even if you're not a fan, you may get something out of it) Canadians have become used to having top-class sporting events delivered to them in their own homes on wide-screen TV. We watch the NHL every Saturday, and sit back to appreciate the seemingly effortless passing, shooting, and checking, delivered to us from arenas hundreds and thousands of kilometers away.

But when we have all our sporting entertainment delivered to us in the comfort of our own living room, as we sit back with beer and snacks, then the game, however physical it may be, can seem almost ghost-like. The players glide as if on tracks; goals are broken down in slow motion till they seem almost inevitable.

But a whole new dimension is added when you're there in person. I grew up in Montreal, and occasionally, as a rare treat, got to watch an NHL game at the old Forum. For those of you into ancient history, this was when Montreal fielded a future Hall-of-Fame line-up: Maurice and Henri Richard, Jean Beliveau, Doug Harvey, Jacques Plante, Bernie Geoffrion and so many more.

But they weren't figures in a high-light reel. They were on the ice, sweating it out one period at a time. Sometimes they even interacted with the crowd ? like when I watched Jacques Laperriere get into a debate with a fan about how to cover Bobby Hull. If you were there, you could take everything in ? and you provided your own play-by-play in your head.

In comparison to today, many of the players were actually local ? from Montreal itself ? like the Richards. For example, All-Star defenceman Doug Harvey was from, and lived in, my neighbourhood.

Players today are better in every way. They're faster, stronger, more skilled. Certainly they're better paid. But they also seem more remote.

If I'm visiting Ottawa, I can pay up to \$250 for a ticket to a Senators game. But I believe I can get more value paying less than \$20 to see the Major Junior A 67's. For one thing, unlike with the Senators, it can be a play-off game. But more to the point, I know I'll see full-throttle hockey, played by young guys who aren't earning seven-figure salaries, but who put in an energy that makes them feel like they are.

Now let's get local. This weekend, the Bancroft Boyer Midget Jets played for the All-Ontario Championship; Saturday was the fourth game of a five game series.

The admission fee was all of \$5. The stands were close to full. And the play was exciting, as the lead changed and then changed again ? until a goal with less than a second on the clock sent the game to overtime, with the winner scored less than two minutes before the end of the first overtime period.

But it wasn't just the excitement of the game itself. It was watching the effort ? the sheer sweat ? of the young players trying their best to do their best. The play wasn't TV-smooth. Pucks went astray. Passes didn't find their target. Shots misfired. Goalies whiffed on shots.

But that wasn't the key element. It wasn't skill you were watching, it was spirit. The players were in it to win it. You could see the determination.

For many, this was their last game of minor hockey. And they fought all the way.

When you're at the arena, you could feel all of it ? the break-outs, the body checks, the bumping in the corners. And when a player fanned on a shot or pass, you could feel the agony.

Everything was real, not an image on a television screen. You could hear steel on ice, wood on rubber. There were no instant replays, because you were in the instant.

There are many reasons to support local sports teams ? knowing the players or their parents, pride of locale ? but the best reason is to bring you to the game, as it is played out in real time in front of you by real people. You can appreciate what the athletes are putting out. You can better understand how difficult it is to master game skills. You can feel the triumphs and the upsets up close and personal, like you never can on a TV screen.

In short, you can truly enter into the game.

So if you have the opportunity to watch minor or school sports, take the opportunity- and surprise yourself as to how involved and engaged you can be with what you're watching.

Needless to say, the same goes for artistic performances. Watch what the youth have put into what they're putting out, and most often, you will be impressed ? and highly entertained.

Viva Las Locals!