



Cultural Change in Sport

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40th Christmas Celebration

Thank you for that very, very generous introduction. Thank you for the welcome. It's a great privilege for me to be able to share a few words with you this evening as part of the Christian Embassy 40th Christmas Dinner.

December 17 2022: a date I will never forget. On that day, I was elected to the Board of Directors of Hockey Canada, and chosen to chair that board. Many of you will recall the circumstances leading up to that pivotal day. The previous Board of Directors and CEO had resigned as a result of a controversy involving the Junior Team that represented Canada at the 2018 World Junior Championships.

The handling of allegations stemming from that incident resulted in a request made by the organization, the former Supreme Court of Canada Justice Thomas Cromwell, to review Hockey Canada's governance structure. That review led to a number of significant recommendations, which provided the foundation on which the new Board of Directors established its priorities.

So how does a black guy who was born in Kingston, Jamaica and spent his formative years in Kingston, Ontario, never having the opportunity to play organized hockey, end up leading an organization like Hockey Canada—a large national sport organization, that in many ways seemed more like a midsize business, than a not for profit sports governing body?

As an immigrant to a new country, settling in Kingston, Ontario, a city where we were one of two black families, integration into the hockey world wasn't top of mind for my family. The focus in our household was always on education. My parents had little knowledge of sports and even less interest. However, they encouraged their children to adapt and embrace the things that made Canada, Canada.

To their chagrin, what I really embraced early on was a love of sports—all sports, including hockey. That's what my neighbor friends were doing. It was baseball and football and ball hockey in the warmer months and ice hockey in the winter. Most of my friends played organized hockey and I dearly wanted to join them.

But my parents gave me three reasons why that couldn't happen. Dad was a mature student going to Queen's University at the time with three young children. So they said basically, we have no money, we have no time, and we have no transportation. It would be several years later before my parents purchased their first car. So organized hockey wasn't going to happen for me. But that didn't deter me from following the game—whether it was through collecting cards, or other memorabilia, or watching the NHL every Saturday night on television with my younger brother.

So with that background, leading Hockey Canada certainly wasn't something that I had my sights set on. Like many Canadians and hockey fans, I had difficulty grappling with what I was hearing through the media reports, which were coming out daily. There were parliamentary committees calling for drastic action. The Prime Minister of Canada himself was suggesting that perhaps the existing organization should be shut down and replaced with a new structure. It was a time of complete turmoil in the organization, as many commentators were very critical of some of the decisions that had been made.

And as I watched the drama unfold, I had no idea that I might be one day asked to become part of the solution. It was the farthest thing from my mind. Until one day, I received a call, literally out of the blue, from someone who said he was the chair of the Hockey Canada Nominating Committee that had been struck to preside over the election of a new Board of Directors, a transitional board that would have a one year mandate to see if they could chart a new course for the organization, right this ship and change the culture.

Well, initially, I thought it might have been one of my golf buddies trying to play a trick on me. But then, as the gentleman spoke, he mentioned that we had been at Queen's University at the same time, but had never met. He managed to convince me that this was a serious call and that my name had been raised as someone who might be able to help the organization get through this crisis.

I wasn't initially convinced that it was something that I wanted to do, or that it was even possible to take on this massive challenge of trying to change the culture of the sport that so many Canadians were passionate about. A sport that was managed at the development levels by individuals with entrenched ideas about how they should go about the business of running hockey.

And I wasn't someone who was quickly identified with the sport of hockey. I had been an athlete a long time ago, but in the sport of track and field as a sprinter. I was a national champion and Olympian and also played collegiate football.

But what did I know about hockey? As a youngster growing up in Kingston, I'd learned to skate in a neighbor's backyard skating rink, on second hand skates that my parents purchased for Christmas. But I had never experienced what it was like to play the game on a team in any type of competitive setting.

Well fast forward to the time when I became a parent. Without much encouragement from me, my two boys decided that they wanted to play hockey. And fortunately, I was in a financial position, unlike my parents, where I could register them to play when they were old enough.

After being elected to the Hockey Canada position, I was often asked what my connection was to hockey. As if it didn't make sense that someone with a background in a different sport would even have enough of an understanding to be able to recognize some of the issues that needed to be addressed.

What many people weren't aware of is that, like so many other Canadian parents, I had spent countless hours at hockey rinks and on the road, traveling to games and tournaments. But the connection was much stronger than many people realized, because one of my boys who started playing the game at six years old, eventually made it all the way to the National Hockey League and was able to play in the NHL for seven years, and another three years in Europe after that.

So in one generation, I went from a kid who wasn't able to play organized hockey, to a parent who was living the dream of watching your child play in the pros. I still remember what a thrill it was as a parent to be present when Mark was called up for his first NHL game. He had been drafted by the New Jersey Devils and was playing his first season for their American Hockey League team when he was called up due to an injury to a defenseman.

And as fate would have it, his first game was against the Ottawa Senators in Ottawa. So of course I, along with many other family members, was there for the game. And I now know what it's like to hold your breath for two and a half hours. New Jersey won, Mark played a simple game and wasn't on the ice for any goals against and that was my main concern. I could finally exhale after a couple of hours.

He was leaving right after the Ottawa game to play in Montreal the next night. My wife and I drove to Montreal the next day and arrived well before the start of the game. I walked around the Bell Center, looking at all the plaques of the famous players, soaking up the atmosphere as much as possible. Well New Jersey won that game and they shut out Montreal.

And a proud and happy father went downstairs to wait for his son to come out of the dressing room. As I saw Mark coming down the ramp towards us, I couldn't have been more proud. He looked so sharp wearing the new suit that I had bought him for the pre-draft combine meetings and he was carrying a hockey stick that he had asked his goalie Martin Brodeur for.

So my first question to him was, "Well, how was it? Your first game at the Bell Center. It must have been awesome, right?"

With a wide eyed look on his face, he said, "Dad, it was amazing!"

Then he continued. He said, "In our dressing room after the game, they had a table full of the best hot dogs I've ever eaten."

Then he opened his suit jacket and I saw that he had a hot dog stuffed in each of the inside pockets. So this was his welcome to the NHL moment: the famous Montreal hot dogs. Well New Jersey had a veteran team at the time. They were just one year removed from having won the Stanley Cup. I suggested to him that he might want to take the hot dogs out of his pockets before going onto the team bus. Otherwise, the players will be merciless with this naive rookie.

Why would you risk a reputation that you had spent years building up, by trying to help repair a situation that, to many, seemed hopeless or simply not worth the effort?

I've been asked many times why did you volunteer to take on this position with Hockey Canada, knowing everything that was happening? It seemed like a no win situation to get involved with: an organization that had lost the trust of so many Canadians. Why would you risk a reputation that you had spent years building up, by trying to help repair a situation that, to many, seemed hopeless or simply not worth the effort?

It was a great question. And I thought of some of the stock answers that people might find plausible, such as hockey had been good to my family. My son was able to play at the highest level and was now working in the front office for one of the NHL's iconic franchises in Toronto. As a Canadian and a hockey fan, I felt some sort of duty to step up and offer to be part of the solution. I didn't want kids at the grassroots level to have to pay the price for mistakes that adults may have made.

It was God's will for my life that I say yes to the opportunity. I've come to believe that there are no coincidences with God.

And all those answers, I think, were accurate and true. But in reality, there is only one answer. It was God's will for my life that I say yes to the opportunity. I've come to believe that there are no coincidences with God.

A few weeks before I'd gotten the call from Hockey Canada, my pastor preached a message about how God can stretch you and put you in places that you haven't been before. But if you trust Him, He will equip you when He puts you in those places, so that you can serve His will and be witness to His presence in your life.

And that was certainly the case this past year. After many years on the bench—I'm comfortable in the courtroom...I was a full time judge for over 25 years. And I was comfortable on the playing field as an

athlete, but I was much less comfortable doing radio and television interviews, or meeting with politicians and corporate executives.

One of the consequences of the upheaval at Hockey Canada, was the loss of government funding. That loss of funding also resulted in a number of corporate partners deciding that they would pause their sponsorship until they were satisfied that they saw meaningful change. The message I was getting from a number of our corporate partners who had put their support on hold, was that they wouldn't be doing anything until they saw a signal from the government that they were satisfied with the changes that had been made and were ready to let us out of the penalty box.

As I prepared for my first meeting with the Sports Minister, Minister St. Onge, I knew that there was a lot riding on it. I prepared as much as I could, memorizing our list of accomplishments to date and hoping to make a good first impression. It was a one on one meeting that started out quite well, but I must have excitedly moved my hands as I was speaking. Those of you who have an Apple Watch will appreciate what I'm about to say. As I was enthusiastically making my points with the minister, Siri jumped in and took over. I was startled and didn't know what to do. Then I quickly recovered and said, "It's okay Siri, I got this."

The minister laughed and said, "My watch does that sometimes too." We were able to continue our meeting uninterrupted thereafter.

A few months later, at the Women's World Championships in Brampton, I had the opportunity to be with the Minister as she made the announcement that we had demonstrated sufficient progress for the government to be able to restore our funding. That was an important milestone, because that announcement opened the door for many of our corporate partners, who had jumped to the sidelines during that tumultuous period, to make the decision that they were renewing or reinstating their commitment to the organization.

In the past eleven months, our transitional board prioritized four key areas: leadership renewal, sports safety, good governance and financial stability and transparency. We hired a new CEO President, invested significantly in sports safety initiatives, implemented critical governance changes recommended in Mr. Cromwell's report and modernized our financial structures to provide more clarity and transparency.

On the ice, Canada hosted three significant international events; the 2023 IIHF World Junior Championships, the 2023 IIHF Women's World Championships and the 2023 World Para Hockey Championships, all of which focused on inspiring the next generation and celebrating the diverse communities that we have across this great country.

The need to change the hockey culture was a cry that we heard often. Last September Hockey Canada hosted a two-day summit called *Beyond the Boards*, a conference designed to examine some of the challenging issues facing the sport: some of the systemic issues like masculine toxicity. And that was a painful, but very necessary experience.

We knew that some of these issues are societal issues—they're not unique to hockey. But our organization had a responsibility and a leadership role to play to show that there is a better path. We know that there's a lot more that needs to be done, but I'm confident that the changes made so far are just the beginning of a major transformation.

What happens when you come to a point in your life when you have
no choice but to relinquish control?

I spoke tonight about organizational change: the progress that can be made when a group of committed individuals makes a decision that things are going to be different. But we've seen what can happen when a previously successful organization, just about to start a new four-year strategic plan, has the bottom fallout.

I want to spend a few minutes tonight talking about individual cultural change. What happens when you come to a point in your life when you have no choice but to relinquish control?

We are a few weeks away from Christmas, a time of reflection for many of us, a time of gift giving and making promises that things will be different once we get past this holiday season. Just a couple of days ago, this past Saturday, as a matter of fact, my mother was laid to rest. On Sunday the thought hit me that, for the first time since I was very young, I'm not going to have to give any thought to what I will get my mother for Christmas.

Around this time of year, she would ask me what I wanted for Christmas, I would say, "Well I don't really need anything," knowing full well what one of the gifts was going to be. Mom had a side hustle selling *Avon* products well into her 90s. So I could be sure that at least one gift would consist of soap on a rope, 3 in 1 body wash, or something along that line.

And I would ask her what she wanted for Christmas. The last few years it has been the same thing: a Walkman. She had one for many years that finally stopped working and over the last couple of Christmases, that's what she asked me to get her. I told her last year that I might have to go to museums to find one. I also told her that she had other options on which she could listen to her music, such as on the iPad that we bought her a few years ago. But no, she wanted that Walkman replaced. So now I won't have to spend time pretending to be looking for another Walkman.

Sports have played a very important role in my life and as I said earlier, my parents were basically indifferent when it came to my athletic endeavors. When I competed in the Olympics, it was the first time my father had ever seen me in any kind of athletic competition. It was the second time my mother had seen me run. I can still remember the first time that I found out that I had made a national team and would be going overseas to compete. I was still a teenager. I came running into the house yelling, "Mom, mom, guess what? I made the national team! I'm going to be going to Italy!"

The next words out of her mouth were, "Well before you leave, can you please close the door? You're letting all the flies in?"

She encouraged me to put my life in God's hands, to recognize that He had a plan for my life. And if I would allow Him to, He would fulfill it in ways I could never dream of.

Sporting goods might not have been the expected gifts for me as a child, but there is a gift that my mother gave me which has lasted a lifetime. As a youngster, she encouraged me to put my life in God's hands, to recognize that He had a plan for my life. And if I would allow Him to, He would fulfill it in ways I could never dream of.

Throughout my life, I've drawn so much strength from knowing that God is in control of my life.

Our world is full of turmoil and for many, they don't see much hope. And it's so easy to be overcome with despair, to be overwhelmed by the events that are taking place in the world today. But throughout my life, I've drawn so much strength from knowing that God is in control of my life. That when I'm tempted to become anxious, or to worry, I can pause and reflect on where He's taken me, how He's carried me through the valleys and to the mountaintops.

Accomplishments are meaningful and worth pursuing, they don't bring you the peace that comes from knowing that God holds your future.

I've been told many times that I'm blessed. And it's true. I've had so many incredible experiences in my life, athletically and professionally. But the important lesson I learned from my parents, and in particular from my mother, who outlived my father by almost 30 years, is that while those accomplishments are meaningful and worth pursuing, they don't bring you the peace that comes from knowing that God holds your future.

In this season of hope, my mother left this earth confident in the hope that she has stored up in heaven: the certainty of eternal life with Christ for those who believe in Him. I wouldn't trade any of my accomplishments for that peace that comes from putting my trust in God.

Thank you for allowing me to share these personal reflections with you this evening. I wish you all a blessed Christmas filled with peace and joy. Thank you.