Herb Brooks: A Tribute

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Sports Illustrated considers the Miracle on Ice the sports event of the 20th century. For an American it would be difficult to argue otherwise. The victory over the Russians at the 1980 Winter Olympic Games is considered by many, including myself, the greatest sports upset of the past half-century.

Coming at a time of gloom in America it seemed even more important. The country was still reeling from the aftermath of Vietnam, the irritation stemming from long lines at the gasoline pumps, the frustrations of the Iranian hostage crisis, and the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. What President Carter had termed a sense of "malaise" had descended on the country and the Miracle on Ice gave Americans something to celebrate. Most Americans can tell you where they were during that game.

The Miracle Worker, Herb Brooks, died this past week in a one car automobile accident in the Twin Cities. He was a Minnesota boy from beginning to end. The St. Paul native grew up on hockey, lived and breathed hockey, and his life is loaded with his hockey achievements. In high school he led his Johnson High team to the State Championship in 1955. From there it was on to the "U" (University of Minnesota for non-Minnesota natives) where Brooks played three years of varsity hockey.

It was in Williams Arena that I first saw Herb Brooks and was amazed by the way in which he played the game. Small in size for a hockey player, Brooks and his line-mates compensated with intensity, speed, and stick handling. Known as the Buzz-saw Line they were a major headache for the opposition, and a delight to all who saw them including myself.

In 1960 Brooks was the last man cut from the Olympic team, one that would work the first Miracle on Ice by winning the Gold Medal. Over the next decade Brooks played for the U.S. National team and was on both the 1964 and 1968 Olympic teams. In the early seventies he began his coaching career at the "U" leading the Minnesota Gophers to NCAA championships in 1974, '76 and '79. This took him on to become the Olympic coach in 1980. As a coach Herb Brooks became knows as a superb tactician and a master motivator. His style was a combination of intimidation and motivation. He smashed lockers, screamed at players, and cajoled them with cliches and inspirational speeches. He was a psychologist who administered a battery of written tests to his players.
"If you want to play this game effectively," Brooks said early in the tournament, "you'd better report with a hard hat and a lunch pail. If not, you better watch some old guys ice fishing." It was a call to give everything you had and then give a little more. He loved his players, albeit tough love, and his players came to love him. His aphorisms became Brookisms: "we were damned if we did and damned if we didn't. Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me. We reloaded, we went up to that tiger and spit in his eye. We went to the well again - the water was colder, the water was deeper."

Somehow this sort of thing worked and Brooks convinced his players that they could beat the Russians and win the gold medal at Lake Placid. Shortly before the Olympic Games began the Russians beat the Americans 10-3 at Madison Square Garden and that too played into the Miracle as Brooks' reputation as a hockey genius was assured.

Over the next two decades Brooks coached at three different NHL stops, one college campus, and coached the French Olympic team in 1998. He was Sporting News NHL Coach of the Year in 1982, inducted into the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame in 1990, inducted into the International Ice Hockey Federation Hall of Fame in 1999, and in 2002 was given the Lester Patrick Award for outstanding service to hockey in the United States.

Through it all he remained Herb Brooks, his own man, giving up jobs over matters of principle and personal differences, turning down jobs that were quite lucrative but not to his taste, and continuing to study and teach the game. In 2002 he led the U.S. Olympic team to the silver medal and in the process defeated the Russians one more time. Not a miracle this time, but still a great coaching job and he was still the great motivator.

I have never liked the coaching style used by Herb Brooks, but for some reason I have always admired Herb Brooks, perhaps because I found his days as a player inspiring. I knew that for all he asked of his players he had given the same of himself. He was a Minnesotan to the core: modest, principled, and sure of himself. Herb Brooks never lost touch with his roots.

In the New York Times today Slava Fetisov, a member of the 1980 Big Red Machine, who coached the Russians at the 2002 Olympics summed it up the larger meaning of 1980 quite nicely: "There's no need to hide the fact that the triumph of an American team that was modest in all respects over the
magnificent team of the Soviet Union was a shock to us. Many spoke of a chain of unfortunate coincidences, about bad luck. It was only years later when I was able to taste the bitter bread of being a coach myself that I fully understood how great Herb Brooks' achievement had been."

Brooks lived with the style exemplified by the Buzz-Saw Line his entire life. He will be remembered for all the mixed messages inherent in that style.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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