

Matt's Message on Creativity and Discipline: Lessons from Hockey for a Country on Edge

From a very young age until I was 14, hockey was literally my whole life. And I was really good at it, leading my team (and probably my league) in scoring and being captain for a few years. My township, Otonabee, made it to the All-Ontario Finals in 1994. Then, when I was 14, I suddenly quit. I quit because it suddenly seemed meaningless. I realized that it didn't matter if a small round disk went into a rectangle or not. It just didn't matter so there was no point trying so hard to get that disk into that rectangle. I suddenly just wanted to be by myself and read Robertson Davies novels and listen to Loreena McKennitt. I saw that hockey was meaningless. I was sure of it.

Now I'm 46 and I'm not so sure anymore.

Last night Canada and the USA played one of the best hockey games I've ever seen: the final, championship game of the Four Nations Face-Off. As the US President is threatening to annex Canada, Canada travelled into the US and just barely played better hockey than them, re-asserting this fact: we are and always have been the best hockey players in the universe. Since we played the Soviet Union in 1972, there have been 14 "best-on-best" competitions, in which professionals were allowed to compete. Canada has won 10 of them. The Soviet Union, the Czech Republic, Sweden, and the USA have each won...one. If Canada lost last night it wouldn't even have really meant anything. We've just always been the best. In all these tournaments that we've won, the USA often finished out of the top three.

But last night, the USA played great. Sure, they lacked the magic that Crosby, McDavid, Gretzky, Lemieux, Howe, Beliveau, and Richard have always had (and no American has ever had), but they competed hard and played a truly great game. The earlier game in the tournament, in which the US started three fights in the first 9 seconds, was more of a circus event than a sports event, but this game, last night, was just two very good teams playing very good hockey.

It went back and forth so many times. Canada scored. The US scored. The US scored to go ahead. Canada scored to tie it. Then it went into overtime.

As a Canadian whose country is being insulted and threatened by the American President, there are two ways in which I found this hockey game meaningful. There are two "takeaways" from this game that will help me understand what I can do as an average run-of-the-mill Canadian during these strange times. These are two themes that helped Canada win the hockey game and that may help our country stand against the USA. These are skills which the Canadian players have developed to a greater extent than the US players have.

Creativity and discipline.

1 - "Creativity" or "doing the unexpected"

The US goals were a result of effort and determination, and strong team play. They were great goals. The US worked together, storming the net together, breaking down Canada's defence, and slamming the puck past Jordan Binnington, Canada's goalie. Canada's first goal was also great. It was a smart shot from a long way out as a couple Canadian players were blocking the US goalie's vision. A great, smart goal. Teamwork. All three goals were awesome and exciting.

But then, Canada's game-tying, second goal was a thing of...unexpected, unsettling creativity.

<https://www.facebook.com/reel/933570505617296>

Canadian Mitch Marner entered the US zone carrying the puck. Usually in this situation, the puck carrier skates in on his wing and chooses to either take a shot at the net or to pass to a teammate in front of the net. The puck carrier stays in his lane. This has happened millions of times.

But Canadian Mitch Marner did something unexpected and creative. Instead of skating straight down his wing and choosing to pass or shoot, he cut at a right angle into the center of the ice, moving sideways, not forward!! First of all, this is dangerous. You could get knocked into next week by a backchecking forward if you do this at the wrong time. But Marner knew he had space. And when he went sideways, the US defender, Adam Fox, went with him. And that meant that the left side of the ice was open! Marner had tricked Adam Fox into abandoning his position! And – look! – another Canadian is speeding down the left wing behind Marner! Sam Bennett! And now that Marner has taken the US defenceman out of the play, he turns towards the open area he has created and softly passes the puck to Sam Bennett, gently serving it up on a platter! It's a pass so gentle and soft that a baby could've received it! And now there's no defender between Bennett and the US net!!

The American who was trying to defend Mitch Marner on this play was Adam Fox. Adam Fox won the NHL award as Best Defenceman a few years back. He's no fool. But when this strange Canadian suddenly went sideways instead of forwards, Fox did not know what to do. He followed Marner into the center of the ice instead of staying in position and letting someone else cover him.

So, as I said, Sam Bennett suddenly had the puck with no-one but the US goalie to beat. And he beat him. Game tied.

Marner's goal was creative.

What does it mean to be creative? I think it means: making something out of nothing. "Creatio ex nihilo" is the Latin term for how God created the universe "out of nothing." God's universe is the ultimate unexpected thing, the ultimate miracle. There was nothing. Then there was something. If you really think about that, it's shocking. How do you get from nothing to something? But that's the miracle of creation. The universe makes no

sense. It shouldn't be here. Scientists now know that the space-time continuum has a definite beginning. But how do you get from "no universe" to "universe"? Creation. An unexpected act. Something outside of common sense. A new thing.

Humanity's creative acts mirror that great divine act of creation, which is ongoing as the universe unfolds miraculously every day. Every act of genius is related to creation: something out of nothing. Watching Mitch Marner turn the US defence inside-out with his unexpected creativity was really, really fun: as fun as watching a great artist at work. The US team is full of great hockey players. But last night, the only real creativity – or even genius – was Canadian.

And there was another aspect of Canadian creativity as well. Enter: Jordan Binnington, Canada's goalie, whom *everyone* said was not as good as the US goalie, Connor Hellebuyck. Even I said to someone, "I wish we had someone like Brodeur or Price in goal." I was a fool. Binnington's performance last night will now go down as one of the very best games a goalie has ever played while wearing the Maple Leaf.

But here's the thing: it wasn't just good or great goaltending. The US goalie played great. Binnington didn't just play great, but he made something out of nothing, making two saves that should have been US goals in overtime, which would have won the tournament. One save in particular was astonishing.

<https://www.nhl.com/video/can-usa-binnington-with-a-great-save-against-brady-tkachuk-6369130562112>

The US took a shot and Biddington made a normal save. But then the puck went to the side of the net where Brady Tkachuk was standing. Now let me just say: I did NOT want Brady Tkachuk to win the tournament. America winning would have been one thing; Brady Tkachuk scoring the winning goal would've been hard to take.

Tkachuk is one of the Americans who started all the fights in the previous Canada-USA game, in a premeditated display. In that moment when hockey was on the world stage, Brady Tkachuk and his brother Matthew were dragging hockey back to the old days of staged fights and settling personal scores. Hockey sometimes has the (well-deserved) reputation of being the Jerry Springer Show of sports, in which fighting is encouraged as a way to boost TV ratings. The Sportsnet commentators absolutely loved the mini brawl. Here in 2025, fighting is now a very small part of NHL hockey and smaller, skilled players are making the game better than ever. In those opening moments, the Tkachuk brothers were banging the glass and high-fiving each other after the fights, like it was a wrestling event, hoping they could intimidate Canada with their toughness and patriotism. Nice try, guys.

So anyways, back to overtime and Brady Tkachuk has the puck on his stick beside the open Canadian net. He's on a sharp angle, but there's no doubt he could've put the puck in that net. He shoots towards the open net. And somehow...*somehow*...Jordan Binnington, Canada's goalie, jumps to his left, extends his left leg and his glove hand, and catches

Tkachuk's shot cleanly. Binnington took away a goal, thereby stealing the championship out the US's hands.

It was not just good or great, but was completely unexpected, more than what anyone would expect from their goalie. It was creative. I would say it was one of the greatest – most timely – saves in the history of goaltending.

Great saves are often described by play-by-play announcers as “robbery” or “larceny.” That's because the shooter has a sure goal and the goalie somehow...*somehow*...takes it away from them. It's like theft. Highway robbery. Tkachuk was the hero. The game-winning goal was his. He was going to be an immortal American sports legend. Nope. The Canadian goalie stole it all away from him and Tkachuk glided away from the net with his head down. With nothing. Binnington robbed him.

Down at the other end, the US goalie, Hellebuyck, played a great game. He made no mistakes. But when the Canadian Connor MacDavid finally fired the puck into the top corner to win the game in overtime, Hellebuyck did not steal the goal from him. Conceivably, he could have flashed the leather and made an unbelievable glove save, like Binnington did. But last night, Hellebuyck didn't have the magic. Only Biddington did. And we all said the US had the advantage in goal. We were all so wrong!

My only point is: Team Canada had the unexpected on their side. They did a few things that were truly special. There was some magic in the Maple Leaf that the Stars and Stripes didn't have.

So, let's be creative in this crisis. Trump is just being the same-old same-old: a rich guy in a suit and a tie trying to crush everyone different from him. I don't know what we should do, but let's try to be creative. Let's be different from him and all the people like him. Let's do the unexpected. Let's make something out of nothing.

For us in the Church, it's not about making an unbelievable save or pass. For us, the answer is the most unexpected, surprising, creative thing: faith.

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for,
the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1)

Faith is like creation in that it makes something out of nothing. Having faith in a loving God who is bigger than this world can help us find new paths, discovering options that we didn't think were there. It changes the way we see the world. It lifts our mind above the present catastrophes. Faith leads to real creativity – not just a great pass or save, but the creation of a new, different, better world: the creation of our new, different, better selves. Last night our hockey team had creativity. I pray that our country can have it too. I pray that I can have it.

Aside from creativity, there was one other skill that set Canada apart from the US hockey team:

2 - Discipline.

These were two great teams who played a great game. There was very little to set them apart. But right at the end of the game, one US player forgot what his job was, wandered off in the wrong direction, and cost his team the game! I'm sorry to single out one player. I hope he doesn't read this and feel sad. But Auston Matthews looked completely lost as the final overtime goal was being scored. Instead of covering the very dangerous McDavid who was in a very dangerous area, he left McDavid there and attacked the Canadian who had the puck in the corner: Mitch Marner, again!

<https://youtu.be/iGPdb7uOfow>

If Matthews is reading this, it's probably not all your fault. Perhaps someone else could have covered McDavid. But when someone like McDavid is on the ice...everyone should be aware of where he is. You never ever let him stand alone in front of the net.

After the long 60 minute battle in which both teams played great, winning the game was surprisingly easy because McDavid was just standing there all alone and of course Marner got the puck to him. It was a huge missed assignment. And that is a lack of discipline: a mental error.

Don't chase someone who is in a non-dangerous area, leaving someone in a dangerous area. Every player has to *know their job*. All game long, the Canadians knew their jobs and never made any big mistakes. Even when they were behind by a goal, late in the game, they just kept playing their game, not taking unnecessary risks. A new hockey phrase is: "have faith in the process." There's FAITH again!! Who knew faith was required in hockey? Don't panic. Play your game. Do your job. If everyone does their job, we'll win.

The US had one second where one player forgot what their job was. And that meant victory for the team who were all doing their jobs. One team was disciplined. One team had a guy who wandered out of position, trying hard to do something he should have let someone else do.

This really speaks to me about what I should do as a Canadian during these times when our sovereignty is being threatened. I've watched the movie Braveheart too many times. William Wallace, the great Scottish hero, goes to war against the enemy to the south. I find myself wishing I could do that: figure out exactly how to defend ourselves, gather the nation around me, and direct our energies. I'd like to draw my sword and yell, "Freedom!"

But I have to cut the hairs out of our vacuum's beater bar or else we can't vacuum the house. I have to shovel the snow off my roof or else my basement will probably flood when it all melts. I have to *do my part* cleaning the kitchen or else the whole family will feel stress. I have to wipe the snow off Rusty's paws when I let him in or else everyone in the family will get wet socks when the snow comes off his paws and melts all over the floors.

Instead of chasing every crazy news item on the internet and getting all discombobulated about the latest thing Trump is saying, I have to be disciplined. I have to keep him out of my mind and out of my kitchen. Above all, I have to focus on my own mental health. One commentator said that Trump and his people are actually trying to make everyone feel crazy and confused. Well, that's exactly how he's making *me* feel. Discipline is the only answer for that. Even if Trump wants to turn the Gaza Strip into the new French Riviera, I have to clear the snow off my car thoroughly so that I can see well enough to drive safely. If I'm in too much of a hurry and I just scrape off a little space on my windshield because I was watching too many Trump news videos, I could get in an accident.

I have to focus on my responsibilities. Even right now, I have to stop writing this article for a while so I can do the dishes. That's fine.

There. The dishes are done, and I've shovelled more melting snow away from the house.

I can't stand up in the American Congress or House of Representatives and deliver an inspirational speech about how Canada deserves respect. I can't watch every news video and distill it all into a perfect, irrefutable opinion. And in fact, if I spend too much time agonizing about Trump, my life and my relationships may suffer.

I'm going to focus on my own life and relationships and work more than ever, trying to be a light for this world, being disciplined, staying healthy, being as reasonable and realistic as a true Canadian.

If Auston Matthews had covered Connor McDavid in overtime last night, if he had been disciplined and done his job, no-one would have noticed. Marner would not have tried to pass it to McDavid and some other play would have happened. Unfortunately, that's how discipline works; no-one notices it. The best defenders in hockey usually go unnoticed because they're just always quietly doing the right thing. Life is probably like that too; when you make the right choices and take care of yourself and your family, no-one notices. It's just happening. Discipline goes unnoticed. But a whole hockey game – a whole society – is based on it. Without it, people are just running around as aimlessly as Matthews last night in his own zone.

Now I have to say: Matthews is the best goal scorer in the world right now, a truly generational talent, probably the most talented American hockey player ever. And he is getting better as a defensive player. Most of the time, he does his job. All the times he does his job in the defensive zone, people don't notice. Then when he makes a mistake, people like me write a lot about it. Only the lack of discipline gets noticed.

I no longer think I'm called to huge, earth-shaking things. I like keeping things simple in my life. I'm happy playing a supportive role, being a worker, being left alone by the busy society that is rushing around all around me. But actually, I've realized that this kind of life – a small, simple life – is foundational for a society. A country of people who are

working on their relationships, taking time for spirituality, improving themselves, learning every day, loving nature – this will be a strong country that won't fall for anything. The small, simple life is also very good for one's mental health, and that's a huge concern for our society right now.

Simple discipline is how hockey games are won. It's something Canadian hockey players are very good at. And maybe discipline is how we can stay focussed and effective and healthy during these times of crisis.

So, when I quit hockey at 14 because it seemed meaningless, I was only partly right. No, it did not really matter whether or not my team got the small black disk in the red rectangle more often than their team. I was right to be overwhelmed by all the hype of a small-town Ontario hockey championship. I didn't like how everyone was yelling about this small black disk and where it was going. I wanted to get away by myself somewhere where I could hear myself think. I'm glad I took a few years away from the game and learned guitar and read all of Charles Dickens's novels.

But now I know that I can gain inspiration and meaning from the game. First of all, I can play hockey myself, which helps my mental and physical health. But also, I can be amazed at the physical and mental greatness of the men and women who play the game for a living. Seeing the creativity and originality of Mitch Marner as he confused the American defender...seeing the desperation and athleticism of Jordan Binnington as he ROBBED the American forward...seeing the discipline and focus of the whole Canadian team...and seeing Canada do all these things better than the Americans...was nice.

Creativity. Discipline. These are great Canadian virtues that will win hockey games and may help to bring our country through these uncertain times.