

RADLEY: Who better than Ron Foxcroft to be awarded a gold whistle?

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He sure wasn't thinking about receiving any refereeing awards after his first-ever game decades ago when a legendary Hamilton high school coach told him he'd done a rotten job.

Nor when a legendary NCAA basketball coach got so incensed with his calls he took a swing at him.

Or when he needed a police escort to escape from a particularly heated college game in Florida.

He wasn't thinking he'd eventually receive officiating's highest honour when he outraged an Indiana crowd by tossing fiery coach Bobby Knight from a game. Or when he got Michigan State's Judd Heathcote so mad the coach threatened to seek a revocation of the ref's work visa. Or even when he admittedly blew a goaltending call at the buzzer in third overtime in Kentucky that cost the hometown team the game.

"To this day I wake up at night over that one," Ron Foxcroft says.

But for every mistake or controversy, there were 1,000 correct calls and perfectly managed games. Which is why the U.S.-based National Association of Sports Officials will be announcing today that it'll be awarding the 70-year-old Hamiltonian its gold whistle for lifetime achievement in officiating. This is the highest honour an official can receive in North America.

The truth is though, his game-calling is only part of the equation. A small part of it, in fact.

According to NASO president Barry Mano, the award — which has previously been given to NBA official Joey Crawford, NHL officials Terry Gregson, Paul Stewart and Ron Asseltine, NFL officials Jerry Markbreit and Art McNally, baseball umpires Steve Palermo and Durwood Merrill, boxing ref Mills Lane and others — is for making a positive impact on officiating in a variety of ways.

"There are precious few people like Ron Foxcroft anywhere on this planet who have done this consistently," Mano says.

It's true. In addition to his work on the court which allowed him to do games with Michael Jordan, Julius Erving and so many more greats, Foxcroft has been a promoter and protector of referees seemingly forever. Nobody talks up the role and argues for the importance of the gig more passionately than the guy everyone calls Foxy. Nobody holds officials in higher regard or defends them more vigorously.

Of course, his resumé also includes the fact that he invented the Fox40 whistle which is now used by nearly every official in every sport around the world. That he serves as an NBA officiating supervisor. And that he's added to the future of the role through his genes.

One of his sons, Dave, is a CFL referee who has worked three Grey Cups. Another son, Steve, is a CIS basketball official who's called a number of national championships, as well as being on the chain gang for the first-down sticks at Buffalo Bills games for 22 years. His youngest son Ronnie is now a high school basketball ref.

He's quick to point out that he didn't push any of them into the stripes. But they all saw his passion and decided to give it a try.

And their first games? Did they get a better response from the coaches than he did?

"The same," he laughs.

Honestly, that's one of his biggest reasons for staying involved. Foxcroft is quick to point out that officiating is facing some challenging times. Getting new refs to sign up is tough. Retaining them as they get berated by coaches and fans and players is worse.



Ron Foxcroft will receive the highest honour a sports referee can receive from the National Association of Sports Officials.



Referee Ron Foxcroft watches North Carolina's Michael Jordan fly to the basket during a game in December 1981.

High definition TVs and super-slow-motion replays now allow fans at home to see with perfect clarity what the officials humanly can't. Then to decide the guys in stripes are idiots. Having decided that, they conclude the refs deserve to be abused on all close plays.

"It's hard," he says.

So he stays at it. And for his years of dedication, he'll now have a beautiful gold whistle to display.

For the record, yes, it is in the shape of a Fox40. Didn't use to be. Once upon a time it was in the shape of an old-school whistle. Back in 1988 his company paid to have a new mold made so future trophies would match the one they were all now using. Which is good, because it would've been awkward to have one of the old ones on the mantle.

But he's thinking more about the meaning behind it. And wondering how he fits in with that list.

"I looked at the past winners," Foxcroft says, his voice trailing off. "Boy oh boy."

The answer is, he fits in very nicely.

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