

In Real Life

FIRST-PERSON AMERICA



SOUL ON ICE

By Mayer Schiller

MONSEY, NEW YORK—As a rabbi, I teach Talmud daily in a Yeshiva. My outlook is decidedly apocalyptic, because I think our civilization's supposed defenders lack the fortitude these grim times require. But there's one thing I'm never gloomy about—sports: hockey, football, and soccer. Mostly hockey.

Camus wrote that he was never at peace off the soccer field. (Strange peace—he was a goalie!) I know what he meant. No matter what else is up or down in my life, sports is always up. Watching. Playing. Coaching. Officiating.

Since 1979 I have been involved with the Metropolitan Yeshiva High School Hockey League in various capacities. Currently I serve as commissioner. From 1991-95, I coached my school team to five consecutive championships. Oh, I've lost my share also. Heartbreakers, too. Lost the '86 championship in sudden death after we'd tied it up with 12 seconds to go. Lost in '80 in the semi-finals against a fourth-place, below .500, team.

I've celebrated with teams that have captured championships in dramatic fashion, and life doesn't have many sweeter moments. And I've been in losing locker rooms surrounded by wonderful young men, and in a bittersweet way those moments are special too.

But it's not just the winning and losing. I draw deep solace from the "tremendous trifles" of the game: The stats. The rules. The sound of the puck hitting the boards, of the referee's whistle. Game days become enchanted.

Sports, especially physical sports, are a refuge from many of the sicknesses of the modern world. They demand courage and masculine camaraderie. They are essentially romantic, in the deepest sense of the term, in that they create quests and

beckon us to pursue them. Ruthless capitalism has harmed professional sports, but on the local level, especially in private schools or community leagues, these distortions are kept away and sports remain just that: sports.

Several years back I was coaching a team that was not given much of a chance of winning the championship. After each practice, when one of that squad's members would drop me off at my home, I'd ask him "So, David, are you going to be a champ?"

David was very far from being a "champ" in his school work and had just lived through his parents' messy divorce. His inevitable reply was, "I sure hope so, Rabbi, I sure hope so."

Well, we did win that championship. And on the night of the final game, when David dropped me off after the celebration, I turned to him and said, "Well, I guess you are a champ." He just nodded, kind of teary-eyed.

About five minutes after I walked in the door the telephone rang. It was David, and in a voice choked with tears he asked, "Rabbi, am I really a champ, really?"

"Yes, you're a champ. Forever."

"Thanks, Rabbi. I just wanted to hear you say that again."

Western civilization may be doomed. But moments like that make God's world infinitely sweet.

Rabbi Mayer Schiller teaches Talmud at the Yeshiva University High School.

CELEBRITIES

By Richard Kinch

LAKE WORTH, FLORIDA—Today was our first shopping adventure with our new

baby, six-week-old

Judy. Sallying forth into the stark reality of the local mega-mall has become our ritual of returning to the *agora* from the confinement of pregnancy and delivery. And we've had lots of practice—for Judy is our eighth child.

On this particular occasion it seemed that everyone took notice of our family of ten. Clerks, other shoppers, security guards, nervous merchants. After a while, my wife Holly whispered nervously, "everyone who sees us starts counting."

I had never felt self-conscious about our large family in our single-digit days. Often we'd get comments, but always positive. Today I wondered if we were leaving quaintness behind for freakishness.

As I shepherd this flock of blessings, nearly all my vital force is expended in mental factoring, trying to keep inventory: 8 kids. Two to the third power. Twice four. Four pairs. Half boys, half girls, nice balance. Seven ambulatory, one carried, her legs a-dangling down-o. They are eight compass points, with Holly and me in the middle trying to point the way north through a stormy sea of commerce.

After a dozen conversations with strangers, I finally understand: We are celebrities, not freaks. We are like movie stars. We cannot go out in public without having attention focused upon us. Some