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OPINION | COMMENTARY

Trump and the Broad Street Bullies

Intimidation works, as the Philadelphia Flyers proved in the 1970s. The way to beat it is with a better, more worthy game.

By **KEN DRYDEN**

July 7, 2016 7:02 p.m. ET

Later this month, Hillary Clinton will receive the nomination of her party in Philadelphia at an arena not much more than a long slap shot away from the site of the Spectrum, where the Philadelphia Flyers hockey team once played. This short stretch of South Broad Street holds some reminders that are still relevant today.

In the mid-1970s, the Flyers won two straight Stanley Cups. Known as “the Broad Street Bullies,” the team combined a few highly skilled players with a posse of tough guys to intimidate their opponents. In 1976 the Montreal Canadiens, with players quicker and more talented and with a style of play to match, beat the Flyers in the finals in four straight games. I was a member of that Montreal team.



PHOTO: CHAD CROWE

The Flyers had entered the National Hockey League as one of six new expansion teams when the NHL doubled in size in 1967, but they got the shortest of all the short straws. The existing “Original Six” teams made available to the Flyers next to nothing in the expansion draft, and while it was the same for the other new markets, they at least had some history of hockey success. Philadelphia had none. The Flyers would need to compete on the ice with a team that wasn’t competitive,

and off the ice for new fans who, like old fans, don’t like losing. It was possible that some new teams, particularly Philadelphia, would fail.

In 1971 the Flyers hired a smart, cynical and pragmatic coach, Fred Shero. To win, to give the Flyers a chance to survive, Shero had a choice. He could try to make the team a lot better fast, an impossible task, or he could try to make his opponents worse.

Intimidation has been employed as a strategy throughout hockey’s history, by player against player, by some teams against certain others. But for the Flyers, intimidation was the basic team approach. A superior player who is not focused completely on what makes him superior, but is distracted by concerns for his safety, is no longer superior. The Flyers would drag opponents down to their level, then win with their own sprinkling of stars.

Other teams had been tough; the Flyers were punishing. Some players, when the Flyers were the next opponent on the schedule, suddenly came down with the “Philadelphia flu,” as it came to be known, and were unable to play. The Broad Street Bullies began dominating the league.

Lots of people also aren’t given much when they start out. Most decide that’s how things work and do the best they can within the system of which they are a part. But many come to feel left out of this system that makes the decisions that controls their lives. Sometimes those left out become the focus of political parties that promise to right the imbalance. Sometimes, though rarely, one such party wins power. But even then, change is usually hard to detect, and over time most of these outsiders lose interest in politics. To them, if not to the parties themselves, one political party led by people not like them is merely a close variation of another.

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Then
along
comes
Donald
Trump.
An
insider
in most

of his life, he is an outsider to politics. He knows, like Fred Shero knew, that in time some people (and players) do well, but most will never win. They are not talented enough, or privileged enough, or enough of whatever it is the game requires to make it to the top. Mr. Trump persuades them, as Shero had done with his players, that they don’t have to accept their fate and stay on the sidelines, but can fight back in ways that serious people in politics and sports don’t fight, but could in ways that are suited to them.

Mr. Trump himself couldn’t fight back within the existing party system. No party would have sought him as its leader. But he didn’t need the media and public attention that a party ensures; he is Trump. He didn’t need its respectability; people can decide for themselves how much that matters to them. At first, the Trump candidacy seemed laughable to insiders, to those who counted—to party leaders and the media—then irrelevant, then outrageous, then scary. At the same time, those who counted fought back using the skills, smartness and party privilege that had always won them the game. But as with teams playing against the Flyers during those two years in the 1970s, taking that approach didn’t work.

Now many of those same serious people are waiting for Mr. Trump to become more presidential, to give up his game for theirs, just as hockey waited for the Flyers to abandon their brawling tactics and shrink back into respectability. That didn’t happen as long as they were winning, and this won’t happen either. For Trump and many of his supporters, why give up the game they are winning to play a game they are sure to lose?

Other NHL teams couldn’t beat the Flyers at their game; you can’t beat Mr. Trump at his. Those menacing “be careful” warnings of his on Twitter, his encouragement of violence toward protesters at rallies, his anti-immigrant rhetoric—intimidation, easily masked as strength and toughness, can work. The Canadiens won in the 1970s by standing up to the Flyers and by coming up with a better, more worthy game. The challenge for Hillary Clinton is to do the same.

Mr. Dryden is a former member of the Canadian Parliament and goaltender for the Montreal Canadiens. His books include “The Moved and the Shaken: The Story of One Man’s Life” (Penguin, 1993).