

Anaheim Ducks offer more than just great hockey

“Mom, are you crying?” Ben asked me as we watched the tail-end of the last regular-season game for the Anaheim Ducks. It was Teemu Selanne’s last game – excluding our Stanley Cup run – and the Duck organization and the fans were paying tribute to “The Great No. 8.”

In true Selanne form, during HIS moment he extended one of the classiest, character-rich moments in sports history. The spotlight was on him – his big night after playing 21 seasons in the NHL – and he skated over to grab former Ducks goalie, JS Giguere (or Giggy to fans), who was playing against the Ducks that night for Colorado.

But to us fans, Giggy will always be a Duck. He was the goalie who, together with Teemu and the rest of the 2007 team, took the Stanley Cup. He is one of the most adored and admired Ducks, so much so, that you still see his jersey worn, even years after being traded. This is his last year in the NHL as well.

Together Teemu and Giggy took to the ice and shared the applause and adoration together: Two legends taking a spin together after accomplished careers. (I may or may not be tearing up right now, just thinking of the moment.)

“This is why hockey is one of the greatest sports ever, kids!” I preach as I stand three inches from the TV, trying to take it all in. Looking back at the kids I tell them, “You’re seeing history right now! See how he is bringing out Giggy? That shows exemplarily character!”

I’m asked often how I became a hockey fan. We must seem like an odd pair to most. Reluctantly, I went to my first Ducks game during the 2007 – 2008 season. More specifically, it was

my first hockey game ever. My penchant for man-food, tolerance for stadium rock and love of organized chaos came together at Honda Center that fateful Friday night. I was instantly smitten with the game and equally enamored with the fans. I fell hardcore in love with the sport and dedicated myself to learning everything I could about it.

Through the years I've formed friendships with other fans based on our mutual admiration of all things hockey and even started a blog with sports writer and friend, Jenelyn Russo. We wrote on "When Girls Love Hockey" at OCFamily.com for years.

We've been in the Ducks locker room, sat on the bench with players and accompanied them on their annual trip to visit patients at CHOC Children's.

Through our close connection with the Ducks organization, I've come to appreciate how much the team does for our community, more specifically for our kids.

The Ducks' S.C.O.R.E program (Scholastic Curriculum of Recreation and Education) is a classroom program that was developed in 2005 and its in-class and fieldtrip programs use the sport of hockey to teach education fundamentals (such as science, math and reading). S.C.O.R.E also donates school supplies to local classrooms and encourages an active lifestyle by hosting street hockey games and sending classrooms of kids to skate at local ice rinks.

The S.C.O.R.E program is funded by the Anaheim Ducks Foundation and provides all of these services free to more than 25,000 local students a year.

Math, science, healthy lifestyle – it all sounds great to parents, right? Yet, the real power play of the S.C.O.R.E is kids absolutely love it! I've seen them jump at the chance to answer questions about the Pythagorean theorem and laugh hilariously while learning about projectile motion during the

First Flight Field Trip at Honda Center.

The Ducks' "Reading is the Goal" program, which raises the reading scores of the children who participate, uses rewards systems to encourage students to read. Schools, classrooms and students win prizes – supplied by the Ducks – when they reach reading goals.

The Ducks organization also supports a place that is close to my heart, CHOC Children's.

For the last few years we were invited to follow a handful of Ducks players through the hallways of O.C.'s only children's hospital. Teemu Selanne told us on one visit, "Our job can be kind of tough...but if we can make the kids smile, it makes it all worth it."

For a sport that is known to be, let's say "rough-and-tumble," the common themes of commitment, character and charity unite the players, the organization and the fans of the Anaheim Ducks, making the sport more valuable to our community than someone not familiar with hockey might realize.

As I write this, the Ducks have just begun their run in the Stanley Cup finals. I absolutely adore playoff hockey, especially because it brings the sport – which can be eclipsed by more popular SoCal pastimes such as basketball and baseball – to the forefront. People are talking about hockey. My kids get to ditch their uniforms and wear Ducks T-Shirts to school the first day of the playoffs.

We will all be watching closely. Let's hope Teemu gets sent off with another Stanley Cup win! Go Ducks!