

Ron Foxcroft – The story of the FOX40

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PED 201
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March 30, 2009

Ron Foxcroft was born in 1947 in the city of Hamilton. From an early age he was interested in sports and often competed in many different sports such as hockey, baseball, and basketball (see interview). However, as he grew up football became the dominant sport in his life, and he played varsity football during high school. This has always been his sport of choice as he enjoys the pace and scoring of the game. Unfortunately, at the age of 17 he suffered a devastating injury playing football. He no longer had full mobility in his knee and so playing sports at high intensity was not an option (interview). From here he gained satisfaction as a basketball referee. Eventually, refereeing became a very successful part - time career and he became world renown as a referee. He refereed NCAA and international games all over the world. Foxcroft retired as Canada's only NCAA basketball referee on March 7, 1999 (8), only to return to the game four years later in the capacity as a "game observer" for the NBA. Before his retirement in 1999, Foxcroft had been officiating a full NCAA schedule for 36 years. He also served as a professional referee in over 30 countries, and refereed the Gold medal game in the 1976 Summer Olympics. His mentors were Kitch MacPherson, Bert Carrigan, Ted Earley and Jim Lyle (interview). He now works as an Evaluator of NBA referees and specifically works with the officiators of the Toronto Raptors to improve on their judgment calls when refereeing (interview).

As a referee he often had problems with an essential piece of equipment. "I always had a problem with whistles," he explains. "They have a cork pea in them and

when you blow a pea - whistle really hard, nothing comes out. When they're frozen or wet or get some dirt inside, they lose their efficiency.”(3) As a result, Foxcroft like many other referees sometimes found he was unable to stop the play even though he saw a clear rule infraction take place. On top of that the noise created by the pea whistle was not very loud so it could easily be drowned out by the noisy din of the crowd.

This problem often created confusion in the sport of basketball at all levels of the game. It hindered proper enforcement of the rules - not to mention causing referees such as Foxcroft substantial embarrassment from time to time. On one frightening occasion, while working a pre-Olympic basketball game in Sao Paulo, Brazil in 1984, Foxcroft blew his whistle when a Brazilian player was fouled at centre court. The whistle jammed, and play continued. Within seconds a riot erupted and Ron Foxcroft was left fearing for his life. He was quoted later as saying, "I remember lying there on the floor and promising myself that if I lived through this riot, I would go back to Canada and design a pea-less whistle."(6) Another time at the Montreal Olympic finals between Yugoslavia and the U.S., in front of 18,000 fans, Foxcroft was booed and hissed at when an American player was elbowed by a Yugoslavian player who was not penalized. However, Foxcroft had seen the infraction and blown his whistle, but it had failed to sound (3).

Eventually, Ron Foxcroft decided to take matters into his own hands in order to improve the situation. He made a list of features that he would like to have from the ideal whistle and showed it too Dan Bruneau, the owner of a plastic molding company in Stoney Creek (3). The manufacturer understood what Mr. Foxcroft wanted but ultimately

needed a design to produce such a product. The plastic manufacturer decided that he would produce this for him if Ron could provide a design. It was at this point that Ron met design consultant Chuck Shepherd. Shepherd's first prototype was much larger and very awkward to carry around, but it was substantially louder and more effective than the pea whistle (3). What would eventually become the FOX40 whistle endured 14 different prototypes before being perfected. The whistle was named FOX40 because of his name and for the fact that he turned 40 when he had the invention patented (3).

The Fox 40 whistle is very similar to the pea-whistle in its look, shape, and design, but uses a very different method to create sound. The pea-whistle gets its warbling tone by means of a small cork pea inside of it, which covers and uncovers a small hole which air blown into the whistle comes out of. This produces a whistle vibrato - until the pea gets stuck in the hole. "It is much like a harmonically tuned instrument because it produces three slightly different frequencies simultaneously. The different frequencies are superimposed on one another out of phase, and thus alternately reinforce and cancel out each other. The result is a loud, piercing vibrato that has no moving parts to get stuck." (3) In fact the loud piercing sound of the whistle is so shrill that it can be heard over a mile away (6).

Foxcroft's new creation sent chills down his spine as he realized he might be on to something big. He was convinced that this would eventually be advocated by basketball as the solely used whistle. However, many investors did not share the same sentiments as Mr. Foxcroft and as a result; financing of the project became an issue.

Eventually, he was able to gather \$100,000 from his own private funds and, in 1987 he created Foxtron Inc. An important aspect of any new invention is that in order for to succeed; it must be manufactured cheaper than products of its competitors. This was done through the process of creating a whistle through the welding of plastic which was perfected by the manufacturing business in charge of making the Fox40 whistle. Foxcroft notes that, "Automation is your best form of protection, even better than a patent in some cases. Furthermore, the developer must use innovative merchandising. "If you don't have innovative merchandising and packaging, you leave your product susceptible to the competition beating it out" (3).

The Fox40 whistle gained endorsement already after the first time it was used at Pan Am Games in Indianapolis, Indiana. The pea-less whistle was tested in 1990 by the National Hockey League, and eventually became the preferred whistle for the National Basketball Association, the National Collegiate Athletic Association and the Canadian Football League (3). This did not surprise Foxcroft but what did is how diverse the use of his innovation became. In fact, the Fox 40 Whistle is an approved and recommended sound signaling device with Coast Guards Worldwide. Over time it has been endorsed by the NHL, NBA, NFL, CFL, NCAA, FIFA, and FINA, as well as the US Coast Guard, Royal Life Saving Society of Canada, American Red Cross, NATO forces, and many more organizations. The Fox 40 is sold in over 100 countries. It is also on permanent display at the Canadian Science and Technology Museum Innovation Centre in Ottawa (7).

In addition to refereeing duties and attending to Fox40 business, Ron is also the President of Fluke Transport & Warehousing in Hamilton, Ontario, which sports the famous slogan "If it arrives on time it's a Fluke." Ron Foxcroft bought the transportation company in 1983 from the founder Bobby Fluke (9). Ron is known as an incredibly hard worker that has contributed to his success. In a recent speech to Oakville's Chamber of Commerce's Small Business week convention he was noted as saying, "I still work 110 hours a week, with about 80 hours in my businesses and 40 hours a week for the NBA. I can outwork anyone in this room and you can take that to the bank. (4)" He also attributes his success to the fact that Fluke Transport gives customers someone to talk to every time a customer phones the company. Instead of getting someone's voicemail the call is directed to someone in the office. Ron said his most lucrative deal came when he answered his phone before 7 AM in the morning. Fluke transport now operates over 100 trucks, 400 trailers and 1.2 million square feet of warehouse space (4). His entrepreneurial efforts have been recognized by Profit magazine as he was recognized as one of the top 10 entrepreneurs within Canada in 1995 (2). Ron Foxcroft has become known as a savvy business man and was quoted by Linda Leatherdale of canoe.ca as saying, "The days of entitlement with our hard-earned tax dollars must end. We all have to operate smarter, leaner and meaner, and government should lead by example and do the same." (10)

On top of his business achievements he also spends time giving back to the city of Hamilton. He has given his time and support to numerous groups including the YMCA,

CYO, Joseph Brant Hospital, Colorectal Cancer Association, Caveat (Canadians against violence everywhere advocating its termination), St. Joseph's Hospital and the Children's Hospital (2). He has bought part of the Hamilton Bulldogs of the American Hockey League (5). Ron has since stepped down as vice-chairman of the Hamilton Bulldogs, although he is still a major part of the ownership group and remains on the board. He has received recognition and received such rewards as Hamilton's "Distinguished Citizen of the Year" 1997, Honorary Doctor of Laws degree from McMaster University, 2001, Queen's Jubilee medal, 2003, and Board of Directors, Hamilton Community Foundation. He was inducted into the basketball hall of fame in 1999 (5).

Ron Foxcroft currently lives in Burlington, Ontario and runs Fox 40 International Inc. with his sons, Steve and Dave. He was inducted into the Canadian Basketball Hall of Fame in 1999. He is also a motivational speaker who is noted to be an entertaining and powerful presenter who captivates, educates and energizes his audiences with his delightful stories, humour and lessons of life. His parting advice and what he calls his mantra is, "It is better to have tried and failed, than to not have tried at all."(5)

The Interview

For our project we had the privilege of interviewing Ron Foxcroft, the man who invented the FOX40 whistle, a whistle that almost everyone has seen at some point in their lives.

When we first contacted Mr. Foxcroft, we were unfortunately unable to get a face to face interview with him. Although Mr. Foxcroft is 62, he is still a very busy man. He asked us if he could answer our questions by email because of his work. On the day we called him he told us that he was going to Cambridge for business, and then that night he was going to Toronto to evaluate NBA referees, before going to Cancun the following morning (although I am not too sure that Cancun was for business). So he emailed us his responses to our questions, and they are as follows.

- 1. You have done some big things in your lifetime. What are the top five personal achievements that you consider the most important in your life?**
 - a. Running my business
 - b. Raising three sons
 - c. Conducting a full time NCAA
 - d. Conducting an international basketball referee career
 - e. Doing these things while suffering from colitis was no easy task. On game day I could not eat sometimes all day until 11pm for fear of a colitis attack.
- 2. What are some other highlights of your life?**
 - a. Mentoring employees other entrepreneurs and students, mentoring youth

- b. Giving not only money but time to charities and youth
- c. Being a leader. I am a better Chair than board member because I enjoy taking on a challenge and leading

3. Your nickname “Mr. Hamilton,” where did that come from?

- a. Mr. Hamilton became my nickname because I am passionate about the people of Hamilton, and throughout my life I have been travelling the world promoting the people of Hamilton.

4. How intense was the 1976 riot in Sao Paulo, Brazil, where your whistle jammed and you swore that if you survived you would create a new whistle when you arrived back in Canada?

- a. The bigger embarrassment was at the 1976 Olympic final when my pea in the whistle stuck. Sao Paulo motivated me to fix the pea in the whistle problem.

5. Were you an avid basketball player growing up?

- a. I once scored 35 points in a high school game played in 6 minute quarters.

I loved basketball. Started playing outdoors 12 months of the year in grade 5.

6. How did you get into officiating?

- a. I hurt my back playing football and became a baseball umpire at age 16.

At 17 Mr. Frank Buchanan said to me that he had refereed me as a player and he said try basketball officiating. He drove me to the class and I met my basketball mentor Kitch MacPherson then the best ref in Canada. I

loved refereeing and had a passion to get better. Kitch worked hard with me. I learned the importance of having a mentor in life.

7. Were you interested in any other sports?

- a. I loved hockey baseball and football.

8. Who were your sporting icons when growing up?

- a. I worshipped Ang Mosca. Bernie Faloney and all the Tiger Cats. Ang Mosca was a Hamilton Tiger Cat in the late fifties and early sixties who won four Gray Cups with the Ti-cats. Bernie Faloney also won four Grey Cups and still holds a record for the most passing yards during a Grey Cup match.

9. What motivated you to buy a trucking company?

- a. Having flunked out of high school I knew I had to be self-employed. I knew also I could outwork anybody. I persuaded the 3 Fluke brothers to sell me their company and pay over time. They had about 6 trucks. I paid them off in 5 yrs and gave the one brother Bobby a job for life.

10. What prompted you to start The Foxcroft Family Youth Fund?

- a. I wanted an opportunity for a fund to help youth that needed help

11. What impact does The Foxcroft Family Youth Fund have for you?

- a. Some people have donated to the fund because they read about my inspiration for the fund. The fund helps kid's participate in sports that would otherwise never have a chance. Sports teaches kids teamwork

12. Are there any other charities that you are a part of that are important to you?

- a. I have given time and money to over 100 charities. Most of these charities are anonymous. I now give a ton of time to City Kidz. Todd Bender and his team are amazing

13. How has your officiating experience helped you in the business world?

- a. Officiating teaches u the art of decision making and helps u with conflict resolution

14. To a business student, such as myself (Tim Vandersluis), what kind of wisdom do you have to impart?

- a. Chase your dream. Be a sponge not a fountain. Seek a mentor. Be passionate. Develop work ethic and reliable follow up. Work hard at people communication skills. Volunteer and network in your community. Surround yourself with smart people and listen.

15. Do you have anything else to add?

- a. My father always told me to “give back more to the city that you work in, than what you take”. I have given a great deal back to the city of Hamilton because I love the dedicated hard working people who live here.

Resources

1. <http://www.prospeakers.com/speakers/speaker.php?fname=Ron&lname=Foxcroft>
2. http://www.sbcn.ca/admin/eZeditor/files/pdf_10_summernews02.pdf
3. http://divemar.com/divemar/docs/fox_story.html
4. http://news.halinet.on.ca/Newspaper/ob/2008_10/ob2008OC2203.pdf
5. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20050629.wfoxcroftbio29/BNStory/specialSmallBusiness>
6. <http://www.famouscanadians.net/name/f/foxcroftron.php>
7. <http://www.northernlife.ca/News/Sports/2008/03-18-08-foxcroft.asp?NLStory=03-18-08-foxcroft>
8. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ron_Foxcroft
9. <http://www.thespec.com/article/411278>
10. <http://money.canoe.ca/Columnists/Leatherdale/2008/07/06/pf-6097121.html>

Some information cited was not found online or in a book, but comes from our interview with Ron Foxcroft. This information is cited as “(interview)”