**The Duke of Deception**

Randy Walker and John Riley, coaches of the Atlantic/Southeastern team at last month's Select 15 Festival in Ann Arbor, Michigan, remember the boy's voice being a little higher-pitched than his teammates'.

Later, it was discovered that the boy, 5'6", 150 lb. center Patrick O'Sullivan, was -- and still is, for that matter -- a 13 year old, an '85 playing on a team of '83s. He was also Atlantic/ S.E.'s #2 center, described by Walker as "a joy to coach" because of his love of the game, his work ethic, and his toughness.

From all indications, the ruse was orchestrated by the boy's father, John O'Sullivan. To reconstruct the events leading up to the boy's appearance at the 15 Festival, we have to go back to last winter. Young Patrick O'Sullivan, who has been playing up two years for quite a while, was playing bantam hockey in Michigan with Belle Tire '83. He was the only non-'83 on the team.

For whatever twisted reason, John O'Sullivan decided his son should compete in the Select 15 Festival. But the 15 Festival is for 15 year olds only. The father was clearly not going to be able to get his son on the team in Michigan. There were just too many coaches, teammates, league officials, and opponents who knew Patrick was an '85 birthdate.

So he'd have to backdoor it. John O'Sullivan, who beat around minor-league hockey for awhile, has an ex-wife in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. So last spring, O'Sullivan registered his son in the Southeast District tryouts using a doctored birth certificate. All players who make it out of the relatively weak Southeast are moved up for the final round of tryouts, this time with the Atlantic District players (hence the team's designation as Atlantic/Southeast). Those final tryouts took place over the weekend of April 24-26 at Ice Line in West Chester, Penn. .

On the day of the final cuts, coaches Walker and Riley remember discussing the young centerman. "We were concerned about his lack of size," Riley recalled. "However, his hands, shot, and his hockey sense in particular, were superior to many who made the team -- never mind the kids we cut!"

So O'Sullivan was named to the Atlantic/Southeast team. Training camp took place in Brick, New Jersey on a weekend in late June. The players were housed in dorms near the rink. . Most parents simply dropped their kids off on Friday night, went home and returned Sunday to pick them up. Not John O'Sullivan. He was, according to Atlantic/S.E. coaches and officials, a constant presence throughout the weekend. Good scammers are nothing if not vigilant.

The Select 15 Festival began August 1 in Ann Arbor. On Tuesday, August 4, O'Sullivan scored the winning goal in his team's 4-1 win over Massachusetts. The next day, Wednesday, was an off day for all teams at the Festival. Round-robin action resumed on Thursday, with Atlantic/S.E. playing Michigan in a game with playoff implications. The Michigan Select 15's included one of O'Sullivan's Belle Tire teammates, forward Bobby Kukulka, as well as many kids he'd competed against in league play. Many of the Michigan parents knew O'Sullivan was 13 as well, but nobody said anything -- at least at the time. Michigan won the game handily, but it was learned later that, had the outcome been different,  Michigan parents were prepared to protest. Since they didn't, USA Hockey officials -- not to mention the Atlantic/S.E. coaches and players -- remained in the dark.

Word leaked out quickly after Atlantic/S.E. finished the tournament with a 6-2 loss to New England in the fifth-place game on Saturday August 8. The senior O'Sullivan, described as a personable guy, casually told the Atlantic/S.E.coaching staff that the Petrolia (Ont.) Jets Jr. B team had expressed interest in his son for the upcoming season. "They think he's an '83," O'Sullivan said, adding, "You guys know, right?"

They did now.

What can USA Hockey do in this situation? Subsequent discussions with John O'Sullivan have left USA Hockey officials with the impression that O'Sullivan sees nothing wrong with his actions, and is actually kind of proud of the whole charade. USA Hockey can't punish the kid. It's not his fault he has a deceitful dad. However, Doug Palazzari, Senior Director of USA Hockey's Youth Programs, said that John O'Sullivan can be barred from coaching any USA Hockey-affiliated team. At present, O'Sullivan is listed on the Belle Tire '83 roster as one of the team's two managers, the same position he held last year.

Perhaps some good can come out of this sorry situation. Perhaps it's time to let the kids play at the highest level they are able to, regardless of age. That would mean turning the 15 Festival into a 15-and-Under, the 16 Festival into a 16-and-Under, and the 17 Festival into a 17-and-Under. That, after all, is the setup at most in-season international events.

By the way, we saw O'Sullivan playing in a bantam tournament in Toronto two weeks ago. He looked good, too -- moving constantly, forcing the play, and creating one scoring opportunity after another.