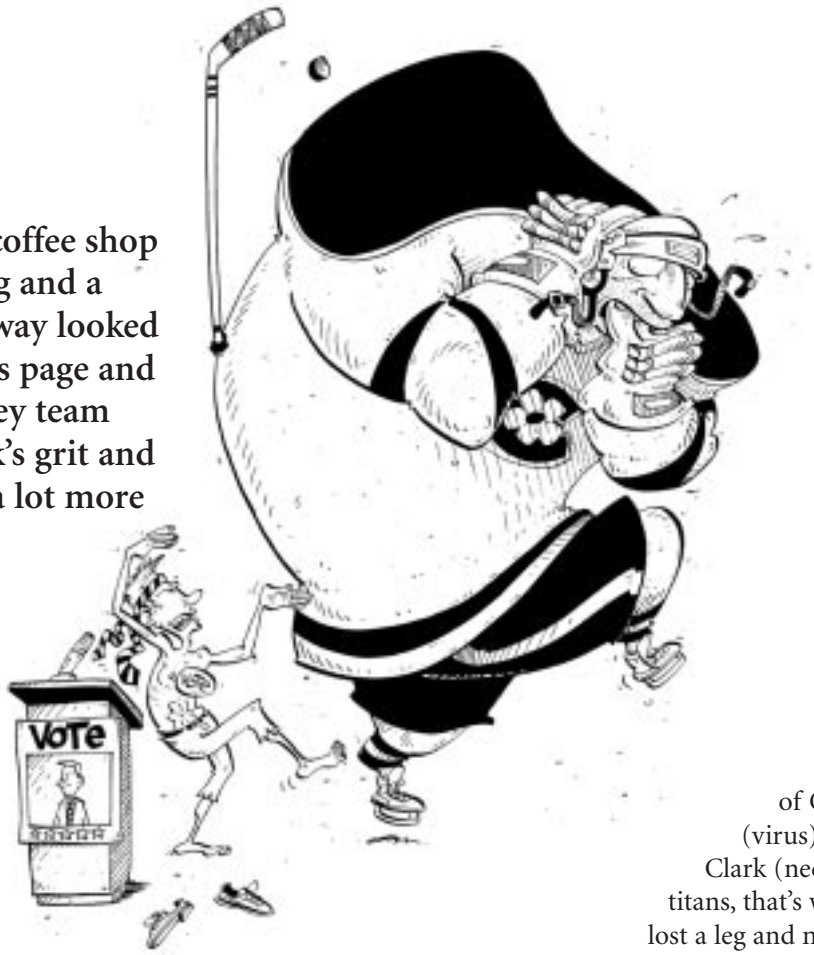
# Who's toughest

BY FRED STENSON




**I was sitting in a coffee shop the other morning and a fellow across the way looked up from his sports page and said, "If our hockey team had half Joe Clark's grit and stamina, we'd be a lot more competitive."**

Okay, I made that up. But, if someone had said that, it would have been worth listening to. It is my contention that politicians are either tougher than professional athletes (in fact) or, at the very least, they are expected to be.

Let's begin with the sportscast. Every day of every sporting season, fans (and victims of second-hand sport) are treated to a litany of pro athlete ow-ies. If you have cable, the sports headline channel offers you round the clock ow-ies.

The list of the injured and ailing is a standard pre-game ritual. Jorgenson (groin), Faulder (hip), Donlan (flu), Kapristan (back spasms), Rimbaud (retaining water).

Interviews with a member of the hospital herd occur prior to most games:

"How's it look for tonight, Razor?"

"Well, you know how badly I want to be in there, John, but it doesn't look good. Any disturbance of the inner ear is hard for an athlete, especially a hard hitter like myself."

"I've heard that after last year's concussion you're still having trouble remembering your Mom's phone number."

"Absolutely true, John. I transpose the fifth and sixth digits every time."

"That's tough, Razor. So you're basically day-to-day is what you're telling me?"

"Much as I'm dying to, I can't imagine playing tonight. I haven't been able to eat for hours."

Why don't we have this at the beginning of each session of the House of Commons? Copps (virus), Thompson (knee), Clark (neck). Because they are titans, that's why. Lucien Bouchard lost a leg and missed fewer games than Jaromir Jagr does with a hip pointer. Preston Manning sitting out with a cold? It's just not done.

Politicians are downright macho, and so are the media types who cover what they do. Whereas sports reporters are most anxious to sympathize with the aches and pains of their sporting Goliaths, the tougher breed of scribe who covers politics considers any announced health woe short of cardiac arrest a sure sign of wimpishness. When Lucien Bouchard lost his leg, they laid off

Illustration: STEVE ATTOE

**Note how parliamentary reporters are made to wait for Mr. Chrétien at the foot of a steep stone staircase. He shows up, makes a few wisecracks, and, especially if he doesn't like the questions, cuts things short by running up the stairs. He may not have the answer to health spending or the paperwork problems over at Human Resources but…**
***he can sure run up those stairs!***

him for about a day. The silence wasn't respectful but at least it was silence. When Pam Barrett, on the other hand, proclaimed a near-death experience in the dentist's chair, there was near-instant media consensus. Open season on Pam. Ravens alerting one another of a road kill. Then there was the time when the Senator from Guanajuato or Ixtlan, or wherever it was, claimed to be medically unfit to do anything but play golf. Slurp. Yum. I remember that feeding frenzy. I was part of it.

Not surprisingly, politicians regard the question "How are you?" as a trick. They are invariably "terrific," "great" or "never better." In the heat of an election campaign, a reporter may sidle up to a candidate and say, "You've been on the road for five solid weeks now, Mr. P. You've given 148 speeches. Getting a little tired?" The politician looks for the position of the camera, licks his finger, swabs both eyebrows, straightens his back, and laughs. "Me? Tired? Hey, I love this. I'm just warming up."

Meanwhile, over in Hogtown, the Blue Jays are in the middle of a homestand. A line of players sitting in the dugout is rubbing liniment into every muscle. A battery of trainers behind them gives vigorous shoulder massages. One player is consulting the team sports psychologist on the long-term effect on one's swing of having had to repeat Grade 3. As always, a few players are out of the lineup, flying to distant cities to get the opinion of a foremost medical authority on whatever currently ails them.

Pierre Elliot Trudeau was without doubt the wisest of all Canadian politicians when it came to understanding the role of fitness in politics. Whereas most prime ministers make fools of themselves when called upon for the ceremonial kick-off on Grey Cup day, squibbing it along the ground, PET went away and practised. With his scarf wagging, his fedora aslant, he booted one end-over-end about forty yards. Even when announcing his retirement, Trudeau's preamble was how many kilometres of brisk walking he'd put in first thing that morning to clear his head.

Jean Chrétien learned many things from his old boss and this is one. Note how parliamentary reporters are made to wait for Mr. Chrétien at the foot of a steep stone staircase. He shows up, makes a few wisecracks, and, especially if he doesn't like the questions, cuts things short by running up the stairs. He may not have the answer to health spending or the paperwork problems over at Human Resources but...he can sure run up those stairs!

Jane Stewart may not be learning this in time. Pestered by the opposition hyenas for several weeks in a row last winter, Ms. Stewart began to look wan, tired and somewhat human. This is definitely not allowed. Jean Chrétien had to run up the stone steps several times in one week on account of it. Ms. Stewart had better run up a few of her own, or her Question Periods may soon be over.

I may have been unfair to pro athletes in this column. Their bodies do take a greater beating than politicians' bodies on an average day, mainly because they keep getting bigger while the surfaces upon which they play keep staying the same size. This was most evident last season when the Philadelphia Flyers iced the biggest team in hockey history. Rumour had it they were forced to warm up in shifts. If the trend continues, hockey may go from being a game of speed to being something like Rubik's Cube, where the two teams work together to get from one end of the rink to the other in the regulation 60 minutes. "Okay, Eric, you go over there, and John, come a bit this way…."

As for the politicians, however, I think I've portrayed them fair and square. They're rough; they're tough; they never show anybody their owies. Next time they have one of those Iron Man shows on the sports channel—World's Toughest Human—I hope they get it right. It shouldn't be several sides of beef pulling a furniture van on a rope; it should be Herb Gray and Deborah Grey going toe to toe. Deborah could filibuster for hours without water. Herb as house leader in the PM's absence could stonewall his way through several Question Periods back-to-back. Diane Ablonczy could get in there and demonstrate her brand of toughness, which is toughness to be understood, such as when she recently said Jean Chrétien was "using a smokescreen to hide a boondoggle."

That's grit.

Fred Stenson has published eight books and written over 130 films and videos.