

“The teddy bears have even beaten the bureaucracy”

Pubblicato: Martedì 30 Dicembre 2014



For once the most beautiful move in a basketball match was not a buzzer beater or a great dunk by the reigning champion. Last Sunday, the best move on so many basketball courts in Italy, including that of Varese, was the "short throw" by all those spectators on the terraces, who tossed a teddy bear or a soft toy onto the parquet at the first basket of the match. Last Sunday was the first, large-scale, Italian *Teddy Bear Toss*, and to understand better what happened, we turned to **Mario Castelli**. In fact, the young journalist from Saronno was the driving force behind the initiative, which was organised in collaboration with the administrators of the Facebook page "La Giornata Tipo" (A Typical Day).

Mario, how did the idea of bringing the "Teddy Bear Toss" to Italy come about?

"I'm a big fan of American sport, and in particular I like to go in search of these 'strange' stories that are now part of the sporting tradition in the USA. One example is the *Teddy Bear Toss*, which comes from the lower hockey leagues and which combines the act of throwing soft toys onto the court, with charity. I always wanted to bring this practice to Italy, but I had two major concerns: first, our sporting mentality, which, let's face it, certainly isn't as open as the Americans'; and then, I didn't even know where to start. Last summer when I started working with Sport Italia, providing the commentary for the FIBA Basketball World Cup, I

extended my contacts and, among them, there was "La Giornata Tipo", a fantastic Facebook page, with thousands of followers. So I decided to put the idea to them, and they enthusiastically welcomed it. And so, out of nowhere, six of us began working like mad on this thing."

How did you organise it?

"It was difficult to involve the authorities and we had to battle with the Italian bureaucracy, which is often more of a hindrance than a help. But we continued to believe, and we wrote e-mails to the teams, players and leagues. The Series A2 League was really happy to give us a hand with the advertising; then, 48 hours before the first scheduled weekend, last weekend, we still hadn't received an answer from the Series A Legabasket, and, frankly, we had given it up for lost. But then, Olimpia Milano published a post on their web-page that said that they was taking part in our initiative. So, within a few hours, the League gave its official approval, and all of the Series were able to participate without incurring any fines for throwing objects onto the court. It was a race against time, but it ended up a success. It was better than we had expected."

Do you already know how many soft toys were collected?

"Some teams have officially told us the numbers, others have sent us videos and photos; in each of them, you can see that there are a great number of soft toys. We know for sure that the team of Legnano collected 1089 soft toys, Varese Basketball, more than 500, and Olimpia Milano, nearly 2000, and they had to open a changing room just to store them."

How did you feel when you saw all of those videos and photos coming to you?

"It was amazing to see how many people throughout Italy, from Series A matches to the junior championships, overcame their initial suspicion to join our initiative. It feels great to know that we've helped many children who will have to spend their holidays in hospital, to have a better Christmas. But, it impressed me even more to see that some teams had also organised other activities at the same time, such as charity stalls, not only to collect teddy bears but also to raise money."

Will the Teddy Bear Toss continue, or will it finish after these two weekends?

"Actually, we thought of it as an initiative for Christmas; some teams, like Treviglio, who don't have any home matches these weekends, have got the League's OK to have a toss after the break. On 6 January, during the Series A2 All Star Game, there'll be the final day of the *Teddy Bear Toss*, in Mantua. We expect to have a packed stadium and we've asked not only the fans, but also the players and their team staff, to bring soft toys. But we'd like to consider this an annual initiative. This time was a trial, and the results are impressive, and now we're working to find sponsors and someone who can help us make this event bigger and bigger."

What is going to happen to the teddy bears you've collected?

"Now they're going to be delivered to hospitals that are local to the various teams; Varese Basketball, for instance, has already made a symbolic delivery of soft toys. The other teddy bears will first be washed and then delivered to sick children, who will have the opportunity to spend some time with their favourite players. The number of soft toys is extremely high, so those that aren't delivered now will be distributed later in the year or left in recreation rooms."

What is the lesson to be learnt from this initiative?

"If you like, that sport can do a lot of things. This is all that sport should be, a combination of values, sensibility and solidarity, not something that infuriates and divides. We know we've made Christmas better for many children, but we mustn't stop

here and think our consciences are clear just because we've thrown a teddy bear onto the court. We have to continue along this road, and given the impressive results and the enthusiasm shown on the court, and the social networks and Facebook pages of the clubs, I really think we're doing the right thing. And to go on with this initiative, we recommend you make a small donation to Peter Pan, a non-profit organisation that helps sick children."

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