

AMHA and Town's 'Head Start' hockey program celebrated at SARC



The Town of Aurora and the Aurora Minor Hockey Association celebrated the success of the Head Start hockey program at the SARC New Roads Toyota Arena on Saturday afternoon.

Mayor Tom Mrakas, AMHA President Corby Saltzman, and AMHA Head Instructor Michael Marley joined 28 participants and volunteer coaches at centre ice for a ceremonial photo and chat.

After Mayor Mrakas congratulated the participants on the strides they've made as hockey players, he shared his satisfaction with the Head Start program in its first year of implementation in Aurora.

'This is a great partnership with the AMHA. We're giving opportunities to kids in our community to learn the game for the first time. It's an expensive sport so it's great to be able to help out with those costs for the families involved. I think it's beneficial for the Town to get involved in such a great Canadian game.'

Mayor Mrakas was also pleased to see a recreational facility like SARC being deployed for such an initiative.

'Absolutely, we're satisfied to see it so well-used by the community. It's why we invested in a new gymnasium. There are so many opportunities for kids to play all kinds of sports here. This truly is a multipurpose facility with the baseball diamond, tennis courts, soccer fields, pool, hockey rinks, pickleball courts and they're all just off the highway for folks coming from out of Town. It's become an amazing facility.'

In the facility's busy mezzanine prior to the centre ice ceremony, AMHA President Corby Saltzman amplified the Mayor's remarks about the importance of Head Start to the community, especially for first-time participants and their families.

'The best part of this program is that we're seeing kids enjoy the game who have never tried hockey before. Prior to playing for the first time, so many kids and their parents think hockey is daunting, but then after eight sessions on the ice, they love it. We have a number of new Canadians who want to join whole-heartedly in Canadian experiences like hockey and it's great to see how sport is built into the fabric of our nation.

'Having an affordable sports program for kids who didn't know where to start with hockey has really helped so many new families with those kinds of decisions. Our hockey community in Aurora generated two years' worth of equipment for the program so it was a big undertaking by so many generous families to make this happen.'

The on-ice leader who makes the Head Start program happen is Head Instructor Michael Marley. The 11-year rep coach, who currently heads the coaching staff of the U13AA Tigers, is most pleased with the improvement of the players in the program.

Coach Marley points to a confident young skater receiving one-on-one instruction in the neutral zone and notes that 'when we started eight weeks ago, he could barely stand on his skates and it's so satisfying to see him striding with confidence out there and

having fun. We also have some players from Session One back in the Fall who have joined the AMHA's U7, U8, and U9 House Leagues. Fifteen of our twenty-eight families received equipment. It's great to help the families with the initial cost of hockey and see them participating in the sport.?

Coach Marley also noted the participation of both his U13AA players and a range of coaches from the AMHA as keys to the program's success.

?We've got eight of the U13 players on the ice today. They're getting their Community Volunteer Service Hours and showing the kids the basic skills of hockey. All seventeen of our players have participated during this Winter session. All the coaches on the ice are volunteers, too?a range of rep and house league coaches from U16 rep to U9 house league. The number of instructors on the ice really helps the kids' confidence and development.?

The Head Start program, a recreational initiative managed jointly by the Town and the AMHA, promotes the basic skills of the game including a skating program and features donated equipment and volunteer coaching to support local youth interested in trying hockey.

Participants are also provided with a jersey and hockey socks. In its first year on operation in Aurora, Session 1 in the Fall featured 18 registrants and Session 2 in the Winter featured 28 registrants.

By Jim Stewart