

Hall of Famer Heese finds success on and off the volleyball court



By Jake Courtepatte

Mark Heese doesn't take for granted the fact he was able to make a career out of his love for beach volleyball.

"It's one of those things where your job is your passion," he says. "I couldn't imagine doing anything else."

Heese takes that passion into the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame as the sole inductee into the "Athletes" category in the Class of 2015.

Growing up in The Beaches area of Toronto, Heese and his wife packed up and moved to Aurora in 2001, after looking at a number of different places across the GTA.

"Our family was growing, so we needed a little bit of a bigger property and a bigger home, so we moved north to Aurora," said Heese. "We looked all around, east, west, north" out of every community we checked out, we got the best feel for Aurora. And we certainly don't regret it today."

In the fourteen years since the move, the Heeses have gone from a family of four to a family of six, a size Heese said would be difficult to raise in a Toronto suburb.

"We even recently just added a dog," laughed Heese. "Just to complete the chaos."

Heese quickly came into contact with Bruce Stafford, founder of Storm Volleyball and an ASHoF inductee in the class of 2014. He used sports, and his expertise, as a good way to get to know the community.

"Ever since I came up I connected with the Storm because I thought it was an easy tie-in with connecting to the schools, club teams, and volleyball programs in the area. Over the years I started coming and visiting the teams more often."

With his children following in his footsteps in the sand, that involvement has grown more and more over the years. When the oldest of Heese's four was about twelve, he became directly involved in coaching with the Storm, now in his fifth year.

He's now followed his son all the way up to the 18U level, and is an assistant coach with his youngest son in the 13U age group. At times, he's helped out as an assistant for his daughter Kayla's teams as well.

Aside from his volunteer work with the Storm, Heese maintains volleyball is not only his passion, but his full-time career "although it wasn't always that way."

A year out of university, Heese took a position as a Phys. Ed. teacher before he was given the opportunity to represent Canada in the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. There, he and partner John Child took home the bronze medal, the first Canadians to do so in the sport's inaugural Games.

?I figured I'd go back (to teaching) after the '96 Olympics, but when we won bronze, the Tour exploded to sixteen or seventeen tournaments a year. It gave me an opportunity to be a full-time professional.?

He spent the next seventeen years on tour, retiring at the age of 39 in 2008. He had thoughts of going back to teaching, even testing the waters at Country Day School in King as a substitute teacher, but his passions remained on the beach.

?It just didn't appeal to me after playing volleyball for so long, being self-employed and managing my own time?I decided to try to continue in the volleyball scene.?

A number of hats must be worn to make a living in a fringe sport, and Heese went on to do so. He has done coaching with the national teams, in London in 2012, and most recently at the Pan Am Games in Toronto. He hopes to continue at the Rio Olympics in 2016.

He runs his own volleyball program in Toronto during the summer as well, and does some motivational speaking, but his main gig is working with volleyball brands, such as clothing sponsor Overkill.

?It runs through my blood, it's my passion. To walk away from volleyball wouldn't seem right.?

When asked how it feels to add his name to the best in athletics in Aurora's history, Heese said he's honoured by the recognition.

?Winning an Olympic medal is almost every kid around the world's dream. I know it was mine. It's an accomplishment on the court, while the Hall of Fame is one off the court. The recognition comes with the accomplishment, and I'm not sure without the Olympics I would be nominated, but I'm happy with the honour.?