

Bantam Express battle for Armour Cup at ACC



By Jake Courtepatte

For most kids in hockey, it's a dream to one day skate on the same ice as their professional heroes.

For the Bantam York-Simcoe Express, it became a reality on Sunday.

The team had the opportunity to train, practice, and play like the Toronto Maple Leafs at the Air Canada Centre, part of Under Armour's 'Storm the Centre' initiative.

'I think what I've seen through the process is a certain element of trying to achieve a common goal that's greater than anything individual and something that they needed each other to do,' said Express head coach Rob Shilton. 'In terms of the competition and going through it with each other was good for strengthening their team bond.'

The Express earned the coveted right as the winners of the 'gauntlet' challenge presented by Under Armour at Toronto's Mastercard Centre two weeks prior, the practice arena of the Maple Leafs. Showing off their skills along with around a dozen other minor hockey teams from across Ontario, the Express first had to gain points by performing tasks such as cheers, naming your stick, and community involvement.

'Some of the stuff required creative thinking,' said Shilton. 'The cheer that they did in the dressing room, they didn't just come up with it off the top of the head, there was some organizing and there was some debate and sharing ideas. The idea of coming together as one to produce one thing was really beneficial.'

At the gauntlet, players skills were put to the test in challenges such as breakaways, puck control, fastest skater, target practice, and goalie agility. At the end of the day, the Express and the Bantam Oshawa Minor Generals were crowned the champions.

'I think that experience, an all-star skills day challenge, is something that they really like to have,' said Shilton. 'It's something cool, it's unique, they never do it, so having that experience was very worthwhile. I think the way that it was structured in terms of having team support, guys cheering each other and all that kind of stuff was good.'

That set up Sunday's once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, to take to the ice at the Air Canada Centre. Players were first treated to an on-ice training session with Leafs legend Wendel Clark, as well as an off-ice talk with ex-Leaf and NHL Network analyst Mike Johnson.

The day capped off with a scrimmage between the two teams, dubbed the Armour Cup, where the Express and Generals took part in an actual game on the home ice of the Toronto Maple Leafs.