

Hockey great delivers message to aspiring student athletes



By Jake Courtepatte

While the student athlete is no stranger to lectures from parents, teachers and coaches when it comes to finding success, perhaps they will listen extra carefully if it comes from someone who they hope to model their athletic career after.

All ears were open Friday afternoon for the player's luncheon at St. Andrew's College's Macpherson Hockey Tournament, as the high schoolers were privy to some valuable advice from none other than Maple Leafs great Wendel Clark.

Clark's son, Cody, is currently in Grade 10 at St. Andrew's.

Clark is no stranger to the boarding school varsity hockey lifestyle. He played his midget hockey for Athol Murray College of Notre Dame in Saskatchewan, and went through the same ringer that these young athletes are now experiencing.

"The biggest years of your life are the years you guys are going through now," said Clark. "Between your grades and your athletics, if you can learn to balance them now, that's what's most important."

Clark rebutted the idea that the younger formative years are a high-pressure situation for those looking to make hockey a career "but rather, that these high school juniors and seniors were only beginning to reach that level.

"This is a big learning stage. If you live in the Toronto area, everyone thinks the ages 8 through 15 are your big pressure years. The truth is, they're not. The stage you guys are getting into now—the hockey you're playing, the schools you're setting yourself up for—this is your time."

The biggest challenge facing the student athlete is certainly time management. In order to be successful, they have to learn to stay on top of both grades and their hockey, as well as maintaining social and family lives.

"One of the worst excuses I hear now in the coaching world is 'well he has to concentrate on this, he can't do that'. Let me tell you, you can do both. You can do both at a high level and with energy."

Despite his rough and tough exterior on the ice, Clark was on the honour roll in his days at Notre Dame.

"My coach at Notre Dame came to me one day and said, 'you won't be on the honour roll come June'. I asked why? He said, 'because hockey season is over'. He was right. Idle minds are a dangerous thing. Stay active, even in the offseason."

Aside from giving life advice, Clark fielded questions from players and coaches directed at the lighter side of his career, such as his favourite coach to play for (Pat Burns) and the top NHL team he played for, the 1992-93 Maple Leafs.

?Doug Gilmour was one of the best players in the NHL in those few years. Then that L.A. game (Game 6 Conference Finals), overtime, could have been really good?and then, Gretzky.

?We were Gretzky'd a lot in those days.?

He spoke of his best time playing hockey, which turned out to be his first year in the NHL.

?The least amount of pressure you have on you in the NHL is in those first few years. You're so happy to be there. I've got the blue and white jersey, I'm sitting in Maple Leaf Gardens?we could lose 6 ? 0. I'm still sitting where I've always wanted to get. What an experience.?

Selected first overall in the 1985 NHL Entry Draft, Clark spent parts of 13 seasons with the Maple Leafs, serving as captain from 1991 to 1994. The Clarks now reside in King City.