

New head coach brings a fresh face to Jr. A Tigers

By Jake Courtepatte

What were you doing at 27-years-old?

Nikita Poliakov, an ex-junior player, is the new head coach of the junior A Aurora Tigers.

Hired in March, Poliakov, who is on the ice almost every day, is preparing for August's prospect camp to create the roster for the 2016-17 Tigers.

Poliakov's relationship with Tigers owner and general manager Jim Thomson has been a long and detailed one, with Poliakov involved in almost every aspect of Thomson's hockey ventures from private lessons to minor league involvements with Richmond Hill and York-Simcoe.

"I've been working with Jim for the last seven and a half years," said Poliakov. "He was trying to get me on board last year, but I was away from hockey for the year. This year, the timing was right, and here we are."

At the age of 27, Poliakov is not that far removed from his own days as a player, beginning junior hockey with the North York Rangers in 2006-07 and continuing with the Upper Canada Hockey Club, putting up point-a-game numbers in 2009-10. He spent one year in the Federal Hockey League in the northeastern United States before turning his sights to coaching and teaching.

With only three players expected to return from the 2015-16 season to this year's crop of Tigers, Poliakov has his work cut out for him. Yet, as he says, the job is made easier by his strong relationship with Thomson, who has almost completely overhauled the organization since taking over as owner just over one year ago.

"It's been great. We've been on the same page as far as how we envision the team, and what we want the team to look like. It makes everything a lot easier."

While the organization is hoping to bounce back from a first-round ousting by the Wellington Dukes in 2016, the preseason schedule is set to begin in just over a month.

"Right now, we've got to take it day-by-day," said Poliakov. "We're planning to have 40 kids out for camp, so it gives us a good look at choosing the team. Then we can say 'ok, this is what we have, and this is what we're going to be going after.'"

Despite the large turnover, Poliakov has already seen potential in the organization, which has been a perennial powerhouse in the regular season for the past five years.

"It's exciting, we have really great people in the organization that are doing a great job scouting and bringing in all different kinds of players. It's definitely made it a lot easier."

As one of the youngest coaches in junior hockey, Poliakov is part of a new crop of young go-getters that has brought a fresh face to hockey and hockey analytics, following the likes of 29-year-old assistant GM of the Maple Leafs Kyle Dubas, and as Poliakov himself mentioned, 26-year-old Phoenix Coyotes GM John Chayka.

"Getting hired as a GM in the NHL is a bit harder to do, but I'm happy with where I'm at."

The OJHL regular season kicks off in early September. For schedules visit www.auroratigers.pointstreaksites.com.