

# HOCKEY FACTORIES

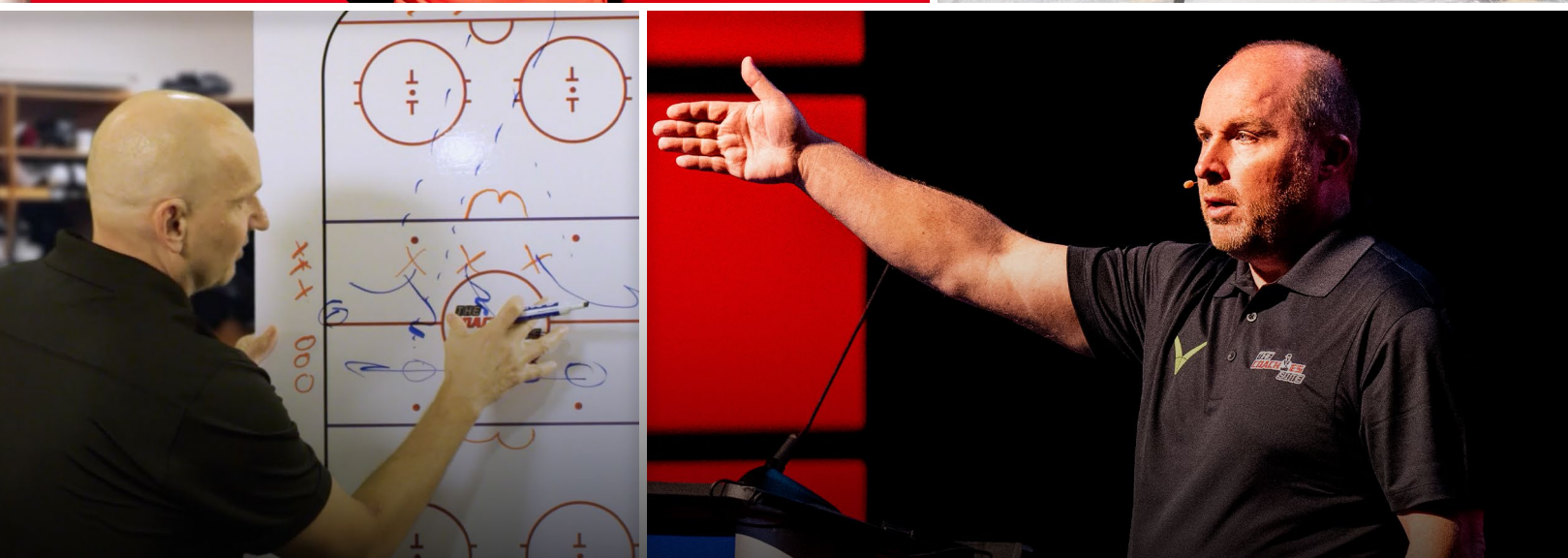


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A LOOK INTO HOCKEY'S  
**TOP DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS**  
FROM AROUND THE WORLD

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## FORWARD

BY AARON WILBUR, FOUNDER OF THE COACHES SITE

At The Coaches Site, we believe there is a great power to be harnessed by coaches sharing their methods and best practices. Our game is constantly evolving, ensuring coaches must remain curious and open to new ideas.

Ours is also a global game, with different philosophies on player development being deployed in every corner of hockey's landscape. With that in mind, I have always felt that dissecting how the top development programs go about their business and making that analysis available to our TCS coaching community, would have a profound impact on the game, along with the experience enjoyed by aspiring players.

The idea for Hockey Factories was to profile five of hockey's leading clubs or academies, each from a different country. We just needed someone to peel back the layers and dig deep into what makes these programs tick.

Enter Matt Dumouchelle, who has done a masterful job at bringing the Hockey Factories series to life. Matt left no stone unturned and was able to tease out what makes each of these organizations a leader in player development. The result, as you will discover, is a blueprint for how any organization can optimize how they develop both players and people.

What was discovered is that while there are many common philosophies when it comes to how players are nurtured and brought through the respective programs, each organization offers insights that were unique to them. There was no smoke or mirrors. The methods are practical and logical. What is

required is alignment throughout an organization, along with a healthy dose of patience. Continuity within your coaching staff doesn't hurt either.

What I'm most proud of is how Matt was able to shine a spotlight on the people who comprised the DNA of each organization. These people aren't motivated by receiving credit or accolades. They are happy to do their work behind the scenes and gain satisfaction by watching their players become the best versions of themselves.

Player development is very much a people business, one rooted in authentic relationships built on trust. In all cases, building relationships preceded the X's & O's or tactical aspects of developing players.

I hope you enjoy this series and that it inspires you to be the best teacher and leader you can be. The role of coaches in our communities and in the lives of the young people you mentor cannot be understated. If you're investing time in helping young people discover skills that will serve them the rest of their lives, you are doing honourable work!

Again, the magic behind the Hockey Factories series is the passion and storytelling of Matt Dumouchelle. Without him, this series wouldn't exist. I am so proud we were able to provide him a platform to impact our game and all the coaches who are committed to creating a positive culture for the players they lead.

Enjoy!

# FRONTLINE

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THE STORY BEHIND

## SHATTUCK-ST. MARY'S

How did a school in Minnesota go from the verge of closing down forever, to developing some of the best players in the NHL today? Tom Ward, Ben Umhoefer and more enlighten us on why SSM might be the biggest factory of them all.

THE STORY BEHIND

## ADLER MANNHEIM

There are more arenas in Toronto, Ontario, than there is in all of Germany. However, the German pipeline to the pros has never been stronger. What is Adler Mannheim doing to challenge their players to reach their potential when ice time is at a premium?

THE STORY BEHIND

## JOKERIT

No country in the world has had a bigger two years of growth than Finland. But for Jokerit, this is 10 years in the making. Find out how communication and consistency have vaulted Jokerit to new heights, and Finnish hockey has placed itself firmly on the global stage.

THE STORY BEHIND

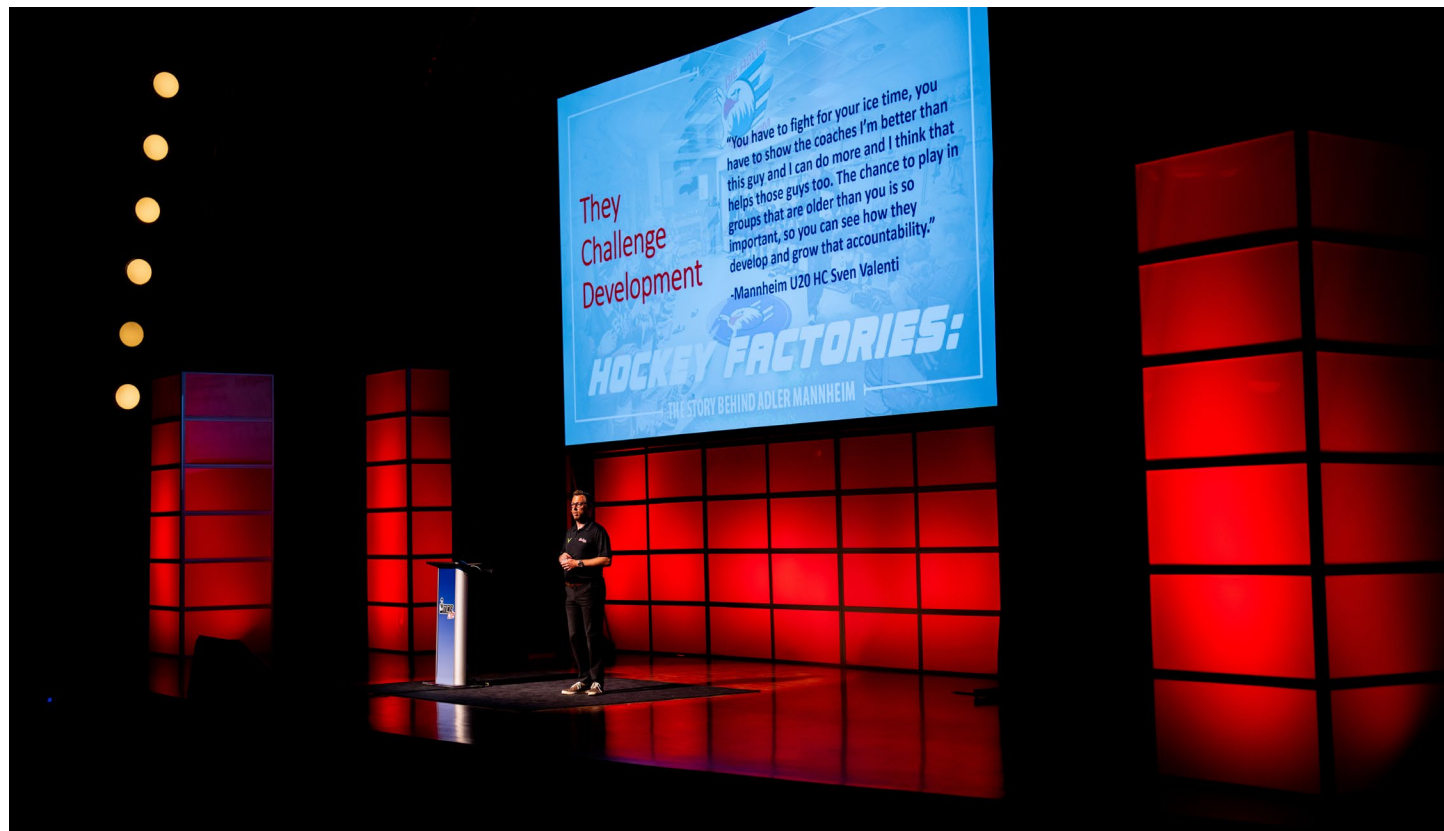
## FROLUNDA HC

Imagine having one of the great development programs in the business and changing your mindset entirely. Roger Ronnberg and Frolunda's about-face has not only created a new wave of hockey players coming from Sweden, they are doing it with a model that flipped the organization on its head.

THE STORY BEHIND

## OKANAGAN HOCKEY ACADEMY

Academies are popping up everywhere in Canada as a new choice in hockey growth and development. More ice, more structure and more hands-on training than minor hockey. Find out how the Okanagan Hockey Academy is setting itself apart in a competitive British Columbia market by going beyond the X's and O's.



## ABOUT HOCKEY FACTORIES

Hockey Factories is a unique look behind the curtain at some of the globe's best hockey development programs. The series allows hockey fans to step into the rooms where Sidney Crosby, Leon Draisaitl, Rasmus Dahlin and hundreds of others got their starts and developed into some of the brightest stars in the NHL. We'll dive into how these programs set their players up for success throughout their development, what coaching strategies they use to get the best out of their kids and how they work on not just creating a great player, but also a great person. Join us as we travel to Minnesota, British Columbia, Germany, Finland and Sweden to see how these programs are doing it right, and what you can take to your program to create your own Hockey Factory.



### About the Author

**MATT DUMOUCHELLE** is entering his fourth season as the Assistant General Manager of the Leamington Flyers of the Greater Ontario Junior Hockey League. Matt is the proud father of Evelyn and Crosley and resides in Windsor, Ontario.

SHATTUCK-  
ST. MARY'S



## THE STORY BEHIND

# SHATTUCK- ST. MARY'S

It was at a bonfire a few years ago that I came across a heated debate about one of the all-time greats.

Two friends of mine, both adamant in their stances and perhaps a little tipsy from their evening engagements, were disputing the truth to Pittsburgh Penguins star, Sidney Crosby, attending high school in Minnesota.

"Blasphemous," said one party. "How could a Cole Harbour, NS, native and Captain Canada have attended school in the United States?" The back and forth was solved just like any other these days.

### "Google: where did Sidney Crosby go to high school?"

As the results trickled in, a map pulled up directing us to Faribault, Minnesota. To a former military school, erected in 1858. To a place that holds a Hall of Fame alumni list, that continues to add to its re-

sume year-after-year. To Shattuck-St. Mary's School.

The campus sits on 250 acres about an hour south of Minneapolis. The home to Centers of Excellence in engineering, bioscience, vocal performance, soccer, figure skating, golf and hockey.

In the early 1970s, the school dropped their military distinction and struggled to find a new specialty, to the point where the doors were close to being closed on the institution forever.

"The school had brought in a consultant a while afterwards," Ben Umhoefer, director of hockey at Shattuck-St. Mary's explains. "He suggested the one asset the school had that wasn't being utilized was the hockey rink, and that's where it started."

Umhoefer was a student enrolled at the school at the time, he would graduate from Shattuck-St. Mary's in 2005, returning in 2010 to coach five of the program's eight teams over 10 seasons before transitioning to his current role.

At the time, Craig Norwich, a local Minnesota hockey legend who starred at the University of Wisconsin and amassed over 100 NHL



**“BE A GOOD PERSON, LOVE THE GAME AND BE SUPER COMPETITIVE. THE MAGIC POTION HERE IS SWEAT.”**

“Gordie Stafford, Pete Johnson, they are obviously legends. You learn a lot about the game, you learn little skills, the mental skills, how bad we want it. Everyone there was so competitive. It’s not just the hockey, it’s the friendships and it was such a great opportunity for me.”

“I have four kids that all played hockey, Jackson was the lucky one who got to go to Shattuck,” Chris LaCombe admits. “I still catch heck from the others who did not get a chance to go.”

LaCombe got involved with Shattuck-St. Mary’s through a different route – the sports agency giant CAA.

He had coached youth hockey in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, and was contacted by CAA to make an introduction to the school when the agency started branching out to athletes.

LaCombe would become so involved with the agency, he would soon join legendary agent Pat Brisson at CAA, leaving his previous career behind.

Jackson LaCombe would return to Minnesota to enroll at Shattuck-St. Mary’s for the 2015-16 season.

He was small, going to the school as a defenseman where he would transition to forward, before returning to the blueline at the end of his high school career.

He also grew. A lot.

Now standing 6-foot-2, the current University of Minnesota product was a 2nd round pick of the Anaheim Ducks in 2019.

“The number one thing he got at that school was confidence,” the senior LaCombe notes. “He was the little guy all the time, fighting as hard as he could. He developed some leadership skills in his last year. Learned how to talk to adults, to give speeches. When you go on that campus, you get a great education and learn so much about yourself as a person.”

LaCombe sees it from the agency side as well.

“When you send them to Shattuck, we feel 100% comfortable when we see a kid went there,” LaCombe says about a potential client. “You can feel they are going to be a reliable player when you see that’s where they came from.”

You hear that from players, agents and especially parents.

“As a parent, the first thing you’re looking at is what kind of people are working there, how they can develop him as a human being and then you look at things on a hockey level.”

Evgeni Nabokov played nearly 700 NHL games. He’s the all-time leader in games, wins and minutes for the San Jose Sharks.

His son Andrei will be attending the school this year.

“Obviously I’ve been very fortunate to know a lot of people who have gone there, so I made a lot of calls and talked to people,” Nabokov explains of the process of deciding where to send Andrei for school. “To be honest with you, I was trying to find something where I’m not going to like it, but I couldn’t find anything.”

“Their reputation speaks for itself, it was comfortable, convenient. I care about good people and I want him around good people.”

games, was a coach at the school and is the one credited with the vision of getting out of the state high school league, playing more games and increasing travel.

Norwich was able to bring in JP Parise to begin the hockey movement.

Parise in turn hired Larry Hendrickson, Mike Eaves and Andy Murray to post up behind the benches and then went on a recruiting spree to get the best players from Minnesota and beyond to attend.

It started at home for Parise, bringing his young sons Zach and Jordan into the fold.

Jordan, a goaltender, played three years at the University of North Dakota, while Zach would go on to play six seasons at Shattuck-St. Mary’s, starring in 125 games and posting 340 points in his last two years, before going 17th overall to the New Jersey Devils in the 2003 NHL draft.

The school had arrived.

Since that time, Shattuck-St. Mary’s has won 27 USA Hockey National Championships, had 93 players selected in the NHL draft, seen over 750 players play D1 or D3 hockey, produced 19 Olympians with six Gold Medalists, a Hobey Baker winner, two Patty Kazmaier Awardees and over 30 current and former USA National & U18 National women’s team players.

The list keeps growing, longer and more impressive as the years go on.

Just this past year, eight Shattuck-St. Mary’s players were selected in the 2021 NHL Draft.

“That’s becoming the norm,” Umhoefer admits. “Our strengths have always been consistency, execution, doing what we say we are going to do, not over complicating, pride in the work and focusing on development.”

### AN EASY DECISION

Some journeys to Shattuck-St. Mary’s happen in their own backyard, others happen on the other side of the world.

“After 14 years in Russia, my family and I started thinking about moving to the United States,” Artem Shlaine says. “You get a much better look from scouts, and your chances to get seen just increase.”

“My dad had sent emails around to a few American schools, but the amount for Shattuck was not affordable for my family, so we ended up in South Florida, which really helped me transition a lot.”

Shlaine, a Moscow native, moved to South Florida on his own to enroll at

the South Florida Academy, headed up by former NHLers Olli Jokinen and Tomas Vokoun.

He was living in a dorm and just playing hockey. There were a number of Europeans at the school, so that helped him get settled in his new surroundings.

But Shattuck was always on his mind.

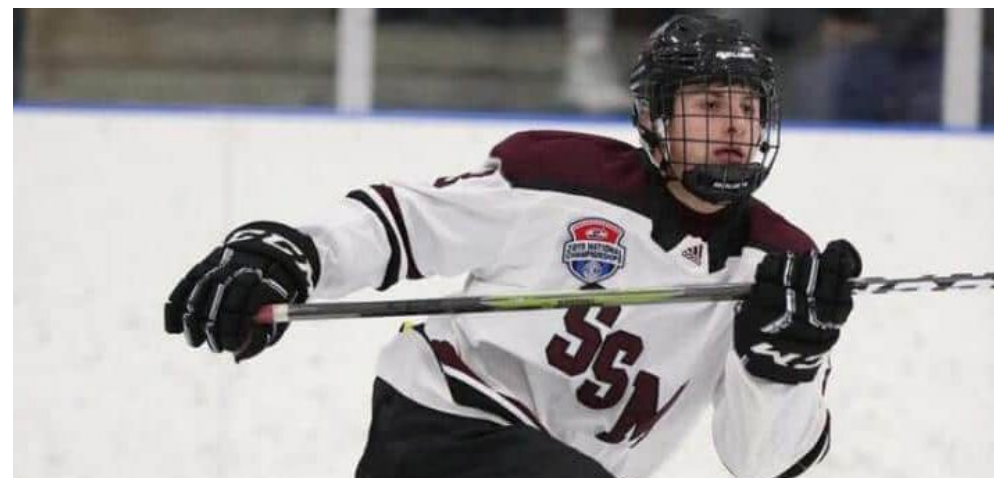
“In my second year in the US, Coach Ben (Umhoefer) saw me at a tournament and emailed my dad saying we would love to have him (at the school),” Shlaine beams. “At that point it became a reality and it was a no-brainer. I was like, ‘Dad, we’re going there.’”

You can tell the pride he has in telling that story even a few years removed from the school.

Shlaine’s father worked in the US and lived in Russia over the course of five years. His mother and brother would join him in America in his third year of high school.

Once arriving at Shattuck-St. Mary’s, Shlaine settled in nicely, despite being the only Russian on the team.

“The biggest change is that everyone who comes to Shattuck was some kind of a leader or a big guy on their former team and they teach you how to play the right way,” Shlaine explains. “It doesn’t matter if you are a goal scorer or a playmaker, you’re going to play in the role you are assigned. They do such a good job



of getting players to play the right way and put players in a position to succeed.”

His high school career notes 102 games and 168 points.

Before graduating to the University of Connecticut, Shlaine was drafted in the 5th round by the New Jersey Devils in the 2020 NHL Draft.

“I always thought I was a guy who can make plays and be responsible in my own zone, but I didn’t really think Shattuck would round me up so well,” Shlaine notes. “Every year you are on a team and your role changes. My first year I started on the 4th line and you make your way through and you have to prove you can play on the 4th line to get on the 3rd line and so on.”

It’s a point that is echoed by many others.

“It was definitely weird at first. My 8th grade year was my first year just playing girls,” explains Mackenna Webster. “It took time getting used to it and being the youngest and coming from St. Louis, the girls around you want it so bad and that’s the kind of atmosphere I’ve always wanted to be in.”

Webster arrived on the scene in 2015, joining the school’s U16 program, posting 62 points in 61 games.

“It was an easy decision,” Webster recalls. “Especially the people that went there, Brianna Decker, the Lamoureux twins and a bunch of other women who were Olympians and knowing Shattuck produced that level of talent was a big plus just going there.”

Webster’s family had received an email from women’s hockey director and head coach, Gordie Stafford and invited them to visit the school.

It immediately checked off all the boxes.

**“The teachers are so accommodating, it’s the perfect place for a hockey player and really just grows you as a person and a hockey player,” Webster reflects.**

Playing 14 seasons in the NHL, Nabokov can tell what's real and what's not. He's trusting Shattuck-St. Mary's to find that in his son.

"I want him to develop. I want him to play hockey and see what that is like. They are one of the closest places to pro hockey," Nabokov states. "When you're in the hockey environment it's going to be interesting to see how he responds. He wants to have fun and play tons of games, win and have fun."

### THE STUDENTS

So how does it happen?

How does a high school on the brink turn into the epicenter of hockey?

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**There are several similar themes that you continue to hear over and over: Good people. Love of the game. Playing with the best. Discipline. Team. Earning your spot.**

"We place a premium on the kid's love of hockey, are they competitive, do they work, how badly do they want to be here," Umhoefer recites. "Most of the interaction at the start is with the parents – you want to feel good rapport when you're talking to them. You want your messaging to be well received and get good responses from them.

"We steer away from families that aren't willing to let their kids work and earn what they get. If the first questions are 'where do you see him fitting?', that's a red flag."

Shattuck-St. Mary's doesn't have to recruit. They get the pick of the litter.

When Shattuck-St. Mary's calls, you listen.

"The volume of people the school say no to is huge," Umhoefer admits. "Last year we got 1,100 boy's inquiries for 35 spots."

"You can overthink it too, don't be an idiot about it. When we have our short list, there are people you trust in the hockey world who knows players better than you and then it's boxes we are trying to check off," Umhoefer explains. "Are the parents' good people? Was the kid raised well? Does the kid buy into the rules we lay out for him? Be a good person, love the game and be super competitive."

It's quick to overlook the fact that there is an academic portion to this facility. And that's not to understate it, because it's top of the charts as well.

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"It's the quality of the student body we have at the school. Our hockey players are more than just hockey players. They excel in the classroom and want to do well at our school."

Father Henry Doyle knows everyone. He's worked at the school for 33 years. He does 15-20 weddings a year, all Shattuck alums.

"One year I had 28," Doyle laughs.

In your life, you will not meet a lot of people like Father Doyle. Engaging, encouraging, dedicated and uplifting is just the start.

"We have some high achievers here and some people that develop here," Doyle brags. "The students here are driven, there is a rigor here. They want to achieve great things on and off the ice."

"The faculty and staff put a lot into their students. They extend themselves over and above what any public school teacher would be able to do," Doyle regals. "Some of our faculty live in the dorms and are dorm parents. A math

teacher could be on duty and have a chance to talk to students about this problem or that problem, not just in math but in life."

One of the more impressive things in Father Doyle's back pocket may be his address book.

Doyle famously sends thousands of cards every year to former alums – to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries and holidays. And to grieve with them during tough times.

"The players always get so excited to send one back," Doyle chuckles. "I remember seeing Jonathan Toews and the first thing he brought up was that he finally sent me a birthday card."

Toews spent two years at Shattuck-St. Mary's from 2003-2005 before launching into a Hall of Fame career with the Chicago Blackhawks.

His pride of being an alum is obvious to Father Doyle.

"Jonathan got us tickets to a Blackhawks/Wild game and my friend took me and brought along a neighbour and their son," Doyle recalls. "We went downstairs to meet the players. The kid was wearing a Blackhawks hat and a Wild jersey, but under his jersey he had an old Shattuck sweatshirt. He raised up the jersey when he saw Jonathan and he said, 'It's the best thing I've signed all day' and I knew Jonathan meant it."

"I get goosebumps talking about it. How far these young people have gone in their lives and how they add to and enrich our lives."

"They become people of integrity. They are hardworking, diligent, passionate, they are respectful to themselves and to others," Doyle says proudly. "It's a joyful honour to see them do so well and to have been a part of it."

### THE MAGIC POTION IS SWEAT

"The coaches here are the reason why I wanted to start coaching," Umhoefer recites. "The environment has always been if you put in the time and work hard at it, being around good players, you will get better."

"As a weaker player on the team, Tom spent so much time with me after practice, simplifying things so I could easily connect and see the improvement to build my confidence. But then he really challenged and was hardest on the best players on the team. There is no doubt in my mind, Tom is one of the best coaches in hockey. I was so fortunate to play for and learn from both him and Gordie."

"Tom is the big toe," Gordie Stafford, the school's girl's hockey coach and director, jokes.

Indeed, Tom Ward is larger than life. In Minnesota hockey, he may be the most successful coach in the state's history.

A Minnesota native, the first tales of Shattuck-St. Mary's may not have painted the picture Tom envisioned.

"If you were getting in trouble your old man would threaten to send you to Shattuck because it was a military school," Ward laughs.

Ward would spend time recruiting players from Shattuck for his junior team, the St. Paul Vulcans of the USHL. He would then move on to serve as Assistant Coach with the University of Wisconsin for four seasons.

"The school was in trouble, but Craig (Norwich) had this vision and got carte blanche to do what he wanted with the program," Ward explains.

"I needed a job and I knew JP Parise a little bit, but he was a legend in Minnesota. My name got brought up when Andy Murray left for the Kings and there was an opening at Shattuck."

"I thought I would be here for a year and then go coach junior or college, but that turned into 18 straight years," Ward notes. "I knew the first week I got here that this was going to work. There were a lot of people here who created



this thing and I was the beneficiary of that, when I came in. Thank God I didn't drop the ball."

Ward's philosophy as a coach has stayed the same. It's time honored and simple. "The magic potion here is sweat," Ward claims. "We've got ice time till we are blue in the face and if you happen to have the talent, we have good coaches here and we can coach these players up. These are good players and we are just trying to move them along."

"This whole thing gives you a chance. We aren't the only place, but we are one of them where you can move on and try to realize some of your dreams and goals."

The team mentality oozes from Ward as he speaks. Team and fundamentals. "We are a developmental program, we believe in jumping over the boards and playing," Ward explains. "This isn't a skills competition; this isn't the home run derby. We are gonna line up, they are going to drop the puck and we are going to have to play a game. You are not out there alone. This is a team game. Lose yourself in the team and be selfless."

The dynamics of the team are another part of the equation, one that Shlaine found out right away and that Ward preaches.

"If you find yourself in a bottom six role or bottom pair role or backup goalie, there is some of that you have to accept and 'atta boy' the other guys as they jump over the boards. It's in practice when you get those reps."

"You may not play with the top three in the game as much, but you'll be with them every day in practice," Ward reminds us. "We rarely have our top six players playing in the same colors in practice. We like to start the year with our sixth D paired with our top D. It should be a badge of honor for our top D. Don't come to me and say 'this guy can't play,' go to him and show him how to play with you, so by the time we get to game 65 we can all play."

The game has changed, the players have changed and how it's coached has changed, but for Ward there are many things that will stand the test of time.

"We do video and things like that, but we aren't jumping off our founda-

“**I GET GOOSEBUMPS TALKING ABOUT IT. HOW FAR THESE YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE GONE IN THEIR LIVES AND HOW THEY ADD TO AND ENRICH OUR LIVES.”**

tions," Ward admits. "Skating, competitiveness, playing from the goal line out, angling in every way, stick work, footwork, more technical things. If you aren't fundamentally sound, you can't skate, you can't backcheck, you can't attack a 1-on-1, you can't attack a 2-on-1, you can't play at the end of the day."

And you will see that throughout a player's career at the school.

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**Ward confirms they do not force coaches into coaching the same way, playing the same systems, using the same forecheck every year. Everyone adds their own personality and it's only to the player's benefit.**

"We don't browbeat our coaches to run the same PP or PK or forecheck all the way through. When the kids go all the way through they are going to have this dossier of hockey that's pretty thick," Ward believes. "My mantra with the coaches has always been shame on us if our kids get somewhere else and the coaches that get them think 'holy smokes what were these kids taught?' We want them thinking 'I'm going back there to get more players, because they have a clue.'"

The value of what is being done at Shattuck-St. Mary's is undeniable. The confidence in the program amongst hockey directors, coaches, players and staff is unmatched.

But the realism and humility are just as prevalent.

"Jonathan Toews could have stayed home in Winnipeg and still done everything that he has done," Ward admits. "We are not naive to that either, but we are confident that if a hungry, young athlete comes here and is serious about it and wants to play hockey there's a chance with the way we do our business that you can move on and do something with it."

Ward would leave the program after the 2015-16 season to become an assistant coach with the Buffalo Sabres.

After the 2018-19 campaign, he would return to his roots.

"I never knew how long I was going to be in the league, but I had always kept in touch with everyone back at school," Ward admits. "I was super fortunate where they basically created a new position in the program, and I got to come back."

"It's never been about egos or careers here," Umhoefer declares, reciting the

story of bringing Ward back. "I'm sure there were some people in the rinks that were like 'why would they even do that?' but for us it was a no brainer. It's always about the best people."

And they expect that from their player as well.

"You have to earn what you get. Everyone practices the powerplay. Everyone practices the penalty kill," Umhoefer agrees. "End of the day, it's a team game. You have to be a good teammate and a good person. Those are the foundations of any team that does well. Comradery, good people, all the cliches and you can see that with every team that wins the Stanley Cup."

#### DON'T F\*\*\* IT UP

My first introduction to the staff at Shattuck-St. Mary's was an enlightening conversation between The Coaches Site CEO Aaron Wilbur, Umhoefer and Stafford.

The line of the meeting was delivered by the relaxed Stafford reflecting on all decisions that get made by the school.

"Whenever we discuss how we are going to move forward or if we are going to make any change, we know it's a big deal, we can feel the shadow of all the alumni over us," Stafford regals.

Waiting for something poetic and thought-provoking, Stafford delivered a much more punctual response.

#### "And that shadow is reminding us, 'don't f\*\*\* it up'."

"However historically this came about, we are a school first," Stafford emphasizes. "A sports academy that fills into a school. The families that send their kids here want them to become better people – not just hockey players."

"We run into older players all the time and they are so interested in what's going on. They want to know exactly what's going on, how it's going and if something changed, they want to know why because they think it was the best when they were there," Ward recalls.

"We have this old dorm, Whipple Dorm, was built in 1858. You go by there on a windy day in February and it sounds like an orchestra is playing there's so many whistles coming from it," Ward chuckles as he tells the tale. "We talk about how we built all these brand-new dorms and they've got air conditioning and all we hear is 'What? No way! Get them back into Whipple! Don't change Whipple, everyone needs to have their time there.'"

All these memories, all these legendary players and the staff and coaches truly ask for one thing in return from their students.

"Leave the place better than you found it and when you leave here go make it better wherever you're at," Ward requests. "If you're a 2nd grade teacher or a biologist or a barrister. Go make it better."

#### LEAVE IT BETTER THAN HOW YOU FOUND IT

There comes an incredible pride worn on the face and heard in the voices of alums, parents, players, staff and coaches at Shattuck-St. Mary's.

Some, like father and son Nabokov are about



to begin that journey, others, like Father Henry Doyle have lived it for the better part of three decades.

"I don't get nostalgic. It's always great to see where they have gone in life. What are they doing in their lives? That's what gives me thrills," Father Doyle recites. "Seeing them apply what they have learned from here in their lives. That's what is great to see. I marvel at the success they have here."

**"It is tattooed squarely on everyone here – we are everyday committed that we are not going to screw this thing up. We are going to leave this place better than how we found it," Ward commits.**

"There are always new challenges, always more you can be doing. We never feel like we've arrived we always feel like there's more we can do," Umhoefer replies after being asked what gets him excited year after year.

No one second guesses it and everyone I've encountered only has the highest of praise.

Chris LaCombe talks about his son wanting to go back to the school as much as he can, give back, donate and represent the school out in the real world.

His son, Jackson, (above) recently experienced what the Shattuck-St. Mary's alumni connection is like.

"He played in a summer pro league and he heads into the locker room, sits down and Zach Parise was right there," LaCombe states. "Zach came up to them and started talking to them right away 'so I hear they redid the locker room at Shattuck' and it became an ice breaker for them."

"Anywhere you go you're going to find a relationship of someone who went to Shattuck or knows a Shattuck guy and if you're a young, up and coming player it gives you a ton of confidence."

Artem Shlaine credits the school for not only making him the player he is today, but the person. His main emphasis was that no one was going to walk you around and show you how to manage your time, that you are in charge of what you get out of the time there.

And Makenna Webster, fresh off a National Championship at the University of Wisconsin, points back to the school as her finest memory.

"As long as I'm alive I'm going to tell everyone I went to Shattuck. It was the best time of my life," Webster states. "I learned so much about myself on and off the ice and I grew so much as a person. I'm going to hopefully send my kids there. There's no place like it. It's one of a kind. It's like one big family."

"The one thing I've learned since coming back is I know, for sure, guaranteed, in granite, stone cold lock, that we do it right here," Ward exclaims. "This is what makes players successful when they move on."

Oh and for the record, Sidney Crosby played one season at Shattuck in 2002-03. He scored 72 goals, picked up 90 assists and totaled 162 points in 57 games. He also became more well-rounded off the ice and continues to be one of the best people to have ever played hockey. Period.



#### THE STORY BEHIND

# ADLER MANNHEIM

The 2020 NHL Draft was different.

Different in so many ways.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2019-2020 NHL regular season was stopped on March 12th, 2020.

The playoffs were different, with a 24 team format where you had to go through a qualifying round, just to get into the playoff picture.

The NHL Draft lottery was different too.

The lottery that year featured 15 teams – seven who didn't make the playoffs and the eight who lost in the qualifying rounds of this new look second season.

Despite having a 2.5% chance of selecting first overall, the New York Rangers slid in to grab coveted Alexis Lafreniere. The Los Angeles Kings jumped up to second, the Ottawa Senators held serve at third.

The draft went as many predicted, Lafreniere first, Quinton Byfield second.

The Senators then took center stage and pulled right at the heartstrings.

Former Jeopardy host, and proud Canadian, Alex Trebek appeared on the screen to announce the 3rd pick of the 2020 NHL Draft.

It would be one of the last public appearances for Trebek before he passed away from pancreatic cancer at the age of 80.

It was just the start for Adler Mannheim's Tim Stutzle.

Because of the pandemic, there was no march to the podium, no shaking hands with your new coach, general manager or the draft wizards that had selected you.

Instead, Stutzle was surrounded by family and friends in a ballroom in Germany as he pulled the Senators new look jersey over his head.



Stutzle was a Senator, and German hockey was back in the spotlight. You have to go back to 1981 to find a German hockey player selected in the NHL draft, who spent any time playing in the league itself. Defenseman Ulrich Hiemer was selected by the Colorado Rockies 48th overall in '81, and played 143 games in the National Hockey League. After that, it was Uwe Krupp in 1983, a 214th overall pick who made some-one look like a genius after he logged 729 games. Goaltender Olaf Kolzig was the first German to go in the 1st round, being taken by Washington 19th overall in 1989.



Jochen Hecht played 833 games as a second rounder for St. Louis in 1995 and Marco Sturm went to San Jose with the 21st overall pick in the 1996 NHL draft. Going 20th overall in 2001 was Marcel Goc.

Goc knows a few things about what it takes to get to the NHL. The Calw, Germany, native suited up for 636 NHL games with San Jose, Nashville, Florida, Pittsburgh and St. Louis. The best success of his career came in the later stages, when he won a silver medal with Germany during their Cinderella run at the 2018 Winter Olympics, beating Canada in the semi-finals before losing to Russia in the Gold Medal game. He followed that up with his first DEL championship in 2019 with Adler Mannheim.

"I came back and wanted to win a Cup in the DEL, my brothers had already won a Cup, so I couldn't finish my career without one of those," Goc jokes. After hanging up the skates, Goc has since transitioned into a new role with Adler Mannheim. He is a newly hired development coach, a job he is still getting used to. "My job now is trying to take care of our under 23 players," Goc explains. "I try



to work with them in separate ice times or after team skates and we try to fill those spots with guys from our U20 team. I'm in touch with the coaches in the program and who is coming through the ranks." "I don't have a team, but I spend quite a bit of time at the rink. My part is still developing, a development coach is not common in Germany." Goc wasn't very familiar with what a development coach's role even was, until a former teammate became his. "I got introduced to the idea when I was in San Jose with Mike Ricci," Goc shares. "Ricci retired and all of a sudden he was a development coach. But it was good for me. Sometimes he was on the ice and sometimes he wasn't, but I could always ask him what he thought of my game, what I could do better and on the ice we would always work on certain stuff – net front, faceoffs, stuff along the boards." "I wanted to be with every age group because I really had no idea what our kids looked like compared to other teams – what are they missing, how you coach them, how to talk to them and try to get the same message across, but you've got to approach the players different."

**THE CLUB**  
Adler Mannheim is the New York Yankees of the Deutsche Eishockey Liga. Since the league began in 1994, Mannheim has eight DEL championships, winning four in five years between 1997 and 2001. Backed by the Hopp family (Dietmar Hopp, the billionaire software engineer) and the Hopp Foundation, the program leads the way in recruiting players throughout Germany, an investment Marcus Kuhl says is the main reason for their success. "It is because of the Hopp Foundation that we have the money and possibility to do all these things," Kuhl, the assistant general manager for Adler Mannheim's feeder program, believes. "We can hire good coaches, go to the schools and bring these kids on the ice and help them out in every situation of their life. To do that you need money and we are very lucky to have the Hopp family." The team plays in the state of the art SAP Arena in Mannheim, which along

with hockey is the host to handball and hundreds of other conferences and events. It's also welcomed Tina Turner, Depeche Mode, Madonna and Justin Timberlake since it opened in 2005. But there is that another branch to Adler Mannheim that is the backbone of where the program's success has come. That's the Youth Eagles. Jungadler Mannheim. A feeder program right to Adler, the DEL and, more recently and frequently, the NHL. With famous graduates like Leon Draisaitl (3rd overall pick to Edmonton in 2014), Moritz Seider (6th overall to Detroit in 2019) and Stutzle, this is where the best young German players strive to go. "Mannheim was the first one." Jungadler's U20 head coach, Sven Valenti details. "When the program started 20 years ago, it just kept growing. The players at this level kept developing and a few made it to the NHL, people start finding out more and more that we have a good program." One of the most valuable development tools Jungadler Mannheim has at their disposal is perhaps the most crucial for any hockey player at any age. "When I grew up, I had practice twice a week and then I played games on the weekend. Now our U20 team is on the ice six times a week," Goc states. "They have athletic training before or after practice, so it became a lot more professional and organized and from the very beginning of our program, U11 and U13, it's streamlined, so the next coach is not always starting from scratch." "They have daily off-ice work – weight practice together – and that's different than other club," Valenti agrees. "Not many junior clubs in Germany have that type of people and professionals we have that are able to work with those players, which has become more important." It's hard to believe ice is difficult to come by, that coming from a spoiled Canadian. We have rinks everywhere. Sure, the ice time may not be great for the beer leaguers, but it's available. There are approximately 38 million people who call Canada home, along with that a recent study found there are over 2,800 indoor ice rinks in the country. Germany is more than twice the size, with a population estimated at over 83 million. As for ice rinks, they come in at a grand total of 218.

**It's hard to get ice in Germany.**

"I think there are more hockey rinks in Toronto than all of Germany," Kuhl estimates. "This is a problem for the future because the hockey rinks in Germany are getting older and the towns don't have the money to build them up. So that means that Jungadler and Adler, we have to work even harder to make not just more players, but good players."

Kuhl is a legend in German hockey. He played 18 years in Germany's top league starting in 1977 and has amassed over 1,000 points. He's also one of the founding fathers of the Jungadler program. Now, it's up to him and general manager Claudio Preto to find the best players in Germany, as early as they can, and get them into the Mannheim program. Ideally growing them through the ranks in Jungadler, playing for the



Adler Mannheim program and then moving on to pro hockey in the DEL, the national team or even the NHL.

“When we are looking for players, we are really looking for coordination, skating, big players, fast players and we try to make their skill side better with different coaches every day,” Kuhl says. “We have off ice programs that are really looking for athletics, skill and coordination. It’s especially important on the big ice over here that you are a good skater, with good skills and a good feel for the game.”

While they are in the Jungadler Mannheim program, they will attend school, live in dormitory style residences, and get on the ice.

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**“Our program is focused on school and hockey. Our philosophy is 51% school, 49% hockey,” Jungadler GM, Claudio Preto includes. “If they can do both, it’s fine. If not, they will not make it in our program. Not everyone can make money playing pro hockey, so it is very important they do well in school too.”**

“We work with the schools so they are always getting free time when they need it. They have teachers there that work privately with them if they need to catch up on work because of hockey.”

“We try to make a good human being,” Kuhl adds. “We try to help them on the ice and off the ice to make them a better person and a better player. We have very close contact with the school to help and inform the players and parents along the way. That’s the only way this will work.”

#### PLAYING UP

The Jungadler Mannheim program is the pipeline – and there may not be a more proficient one in the country.

Players are getting into the Jungadler program as early as 11. From there, it’s all about development, and one of the greatest benefits those in the Mannheim program have found for young players, is playing with and against the group above them.

“It helps them think the game right and get away from bad habits,” Goc thinks. “Sometimes it’s a good reality check of where they are. They might play with the U20s where the things they do don’t work and all of a sudden there’s an odd man rush and a goal against. It’s a learning experience.”

“For others, there’s a big difference in how their body is developed, so it might be a smaller kid who does really well in juniors and when you put him against the pros it’s almost dangerous because they can’t protect themselves,” Goc continues. “But then you see, he might be ready next year, so you think of using him in a practice next time.”

“That helps a lot when a 16-year-old is playing with 18-year-olds, even if it’s just in practice,” Kuhl agrees. “They go further in their development and their thinking and feeling for the game. I think that is a big thing when you have younger players playing with older players because you’ll see them get used to the speed, thinking the game faster and the earlier we can do that the better.”

“If the competition is not as good, there is a chance for the players to develop

bad habits,” Valenti points out right away. “It’s important that we make sure they don’t feel comfortable when they score three goals, but their backchecking or their stick work wasn’t good. We have to take care of that.”

“When they come in, they have to learn how to do their stuff, but in a system,” Valenti goes on. “A lot of times it’s new positioning and a new approach which takes some time for them to adjust to it but, most of the time they get it because they are smart players.”

#### BATTLE FOR YOUR SPOT

Because of the limitations of finding players in Germany, for many coming into the program it is the first time they are playing with others of their skill level.

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**“I think in Canada there are more referees than we have players,” Preto jokes**

For some, they rise to the challenge, for others, they fall.

That’s all part of the process for Mannheim, to find those who succeed and continue to challenge them.

“When you have players coming from smaller teams, they have a lot of ice time with those teams and are used to doing things themselves because they are pretty much always the best player there,” Valenti notes. “Now they must battle for their spot on the ice, which they never had to before. Now you’re going to be with 18 other good players and you have to earn your spot or your ice time will reduce somehow.”

This is how German hockey players get their exposure. They are always playing for their spot, and in most cases, their next spot.

A U15 player could very well practice with the U20 team if they are short on bodies. They likely won’t break that line-up, but it sets them up for future success.

Those players get the early looks, they get the chance to see what it will take to get to the next level – and so do the coaches.

“You have to fight for your ice time, you have to show the coaches I’m better than this guy and I can do more and I think that helps those guys too,” Valenti comments. “The chance to play in groups that are older than you is so important, see how they develop and grow that accountability.”

There is also a benefit to those who aren’t ready to make that jump.

“This year we had three guys go up to the pro team and play there, which means the young guys have to step up and take more responsibility,” Valenti reminds us. “That is their chance to learn quicker and faster when they get pushed into that.”

Jungadler Mannheim is always looking for their next challenge and because of the aforementioned skill level in Germany, that is normally found outside their borders.

“The league in Germany is not that good, like in Canada, where they have to fight every weekend to win tournaments because it’s all on the same level,” Kuhl compares. “That’s why we have to send our teams to Sweden and Switzerland to play higher levels and better teams in other places.”

And with that comes another big adjustment most players in Germany would not have the chance to experience.

“Each country is different,” Preto details. “If we go to Switzerland it’s a fast game, a technical game. Sweden also. If we go to the Czech Republic, it’s a

different style there. But what every game has is the international pride. The teams we are playing want to win for their country.”

“They will play against other European teams just to see where we are at and what other teams look like because we want to be in the mix internationally as well,” Goc mentions. “I think for some it’s very important to see where they stand. Maybe they are more puck skilled than other players and they get away with stuff now that they won’t get away with playing against pros.”

“We’ve also played schools in the USA or in Canada and it’s a great experience for the players to see all those different styles,” Preto says. “And that comes from the support of Mr. Hopp and the Hopp Foundation. It gives us a great advantage.”

“When you travel a lot because our teams played in Sweden or Finland or Canada, that’s what you see,” storied Jungadler head coach Frank Fiscoeder says. “We would fly over and show our guys see how hockey is in the world and tell them ‘these guys will take their job if you don’t do it.’”

#### ALL I DO IS WIN

You didn’t expect to see a DJ Khaled reference in a story about German hockey, did you?

Well, sometimes there just isn’t a better way to introduce someone.

Frank Fiscoeder was a head coach within the Jungadler Mannheim program for 20 seasons. He does not know how to lose.

In fact, when behind the bench in his tenure with Mannheim, he won 17 championships.

He’s also been a U18 National Coach and most recently the head coach of the DEL’s Nurnberg Ice Tigers.

“My junior coach said, ‘a pro career will not be yours’, so I worked a few hockey schools and then worked in a few programs to bring in young kids to hockey,” Fiscoeder explains. “I was very lucky to get involved with Mannheim. We have great support in the school, support in the community and, of course, the Hopp Foundation. They gave us the freedom to sign a lot of coaches, made the great facilities and have made this a pretty optimal place



for hockey in Germany.”

“Frank was a great coach for me, I played when I was 15 under him and he wanted me to get better every day,” Stutzle recalls after a Senators practice. “When I had a bad game, he was really hard on me, which I really liked. In the end, he was one of the best coaches for sure and they can really thank him for their success. He always made a really good team and we had two years when we won the Cup there, he built some great teams.”

“It’s a philosophy thing. We always believed in our development,” Fiscoeder says of the Mannheim program. “There is no player allowed to play with us that is not also doing something else in school, learning a job, having a business, using their head because it’s not different the way you are in your regular life and the way you are as a hockey player.”

“We started out with the same philosophy, so every organization supported by the Hopp family and their foundation works hand-in-hand with the school and mental and personal development,” Fiscoeder says. “The money is not that big that when you are done hockey in Germany, you will still have to work after. So, this is not the end of their life, and that is why the school is still important for them.”

Claudio Preto and Marcus Kuhl credit Frank and others for that.

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**“Our coaches are looking for good attitudes, kids that are willing to work and develop,” Preto says. “Our coaches are responsible for the kids that we bring into the program. Not every kid can be a pro hockey player, but the focus is on the person themselves. If they are willing to work, we are able to do something with them.”**

“It’s really hard to make sports on a high level. For us, it’s very important they finish the school with good marks, and we have a good relationship with the school, they make everything possible,” Preto continues. “If a guy does good at his studies and is a good player, we’ve done a great job. If they end up playing DEL or NHL, then that’s a big thing and we are very happy.”

At its core, Fiscoeder’s coaching philosophy is not anything dramatically different than coaches you are likely around.

Maybe it’s the style of game in Germany that makes it so unique, or maybe it’s the lack of players to pick from, but Fiscoeder’s toughest job is pulling the best out of his players and he does so by going right to the source.

“The ideas I’ve had, I tried to get players involved, get them into the discussion,” Fiscoeder states. “I ask what kind of system they want to play, but in every system, there is a grey area.

I've coached guys with 700 NHL games under their belt, so you can go to him and get his experience, get his feeling."

"When you have this development, we try to build it and teach the game and give players the responsibility to work into the system. You get into an honest, open conversation with players, they want to play a certain way and you can't have them leaving the room saying this way would be better. So, we have that conversation, we clear it out and if you make sure I like it, then I'll say ok and we'll do it."

And he uses all the tools he has to get that point across.

"We show everyone on video and it's played again and again and again and you take the grey areas away so a player cannot come back and say 'you didn't show us that,'" Fiscoeder comments. "This is something I still have problems with because I don't want to be the coach that dictates everything, I want effort, I want work, I want discipline. I can freak out if something isn't working but at any level there should be a certain amount of honesty."

Fiscoeder uses video a lot and brings his players along, just like everything else.

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**"One thing we like to do is have the older guys explain the systems to the younger guys," Fiscoeder divulges. "We will have team meetings where one line will have to explain one type of system on video, cut the video themselves and present it, learn to speak in front of the team. We always talk about leadership, but leading needs to be taught."**

"During the pandemic, I would put a period into the cloud and would tell them 'in the defensive zone give me three bad to good clips and explain why,'" the veteran coach explains. "This was weekly homework, they would send their cuts back, they can draw in it, write in it and teach the game that way to see what they see. It's always different what you see and how they feel it, so this was a good adjustment and the guys had a lot of fun with it."

Once that is drilled in, Fiscoeder and his coaching staff go to work.

"When we get on the ice, it's principles, but not just straight rules, it's more read and react," he explains. "We play half ice and then with U13 we play partly on the whole ice. It makes no sense if you have one good skater, he will kill everyone. He will score five goals and everyone else will get frustrated, so if you play 4-vs-4 in a small area, the only rule is you have to skate, this is something that is hard of the classic coaching style of making systems and rules and giving that framework, but we have to get rid of that even more."

"That style did everything for me," Stutzle reflects. "They played me a lot, wanted me to play with the best players, gave me PP minutes, gave me confidence to play my game and that's what really helped me. They wanted me to get better every day in practice and it was really good for me."

Fiscoeder is Sven Valenti's predecessor.

Valenti climbed through the ranks, starting as a U13 junior coach when his

son was invited to the program. He moved up to U17 and last season got his chance after Fiscoeder left.

"Coaching here, our workload is high compared to other teams because we are trying to get to the international standard that we need to be able to match to the top programs in Europe," Valenti starts. "Our teams are really active, we are practicing that a lot. We want our teams to put pressure on other teams. We don't want our players playing like robots, we want them getting used to finding solutions in different areas and different times. We don't want them to have Plan A, Plan B, Plan C and if those aren't open, they don't know what to do."

Coming in after such a legendary coach does not go unrecognized by Valenti, who admits he's learning every day on the job.

"It's great to have good coaches here for feedback and what do they think of this and that," Valenti admits. "Marcel (Goc) is such a professional and is so down to earth. He just enjoys working with the kids that are here and having fun."

"You should never be too old to learn, there's no reason to be arrogant and think you know everything because you can learn from a U9 or U10 coach or practice because if it's good, why not take it."

"I think we are more structured, and we need to be because of the big ice," Fiscoeder says. "There is so much more freedom now for players. At the beginning you had a lot of scoring young players that were supposed to block shots and play defensively and then everyone was wondering why they couldn't score anymore, so now guys can skate around and back check like Leon (Draisaitl) in his first years – not at all."

#### COACHING THE BEST

"It's always fun. I don't know if it's like this in North America, but I've heard coaches that would say 'I made this guy,' like hell you did. We were lucky, we had this talent in our hands, we didn't destroy it."

Fiscoeder speaks highly of his time with Leon Draisaitl.

Draisaitl, a Koln native, played 40 games with Jungadler Mannheim, scoring 57 points and adding 12 more in eight playoff games.

Kuhl agrees they didn't do too much with Leon, other than let him go.

"Even the best players, like Draisaitl, you don't have to show him a lot when he's 16 because you could already see what he could do, but what he got from us was extra ice time and extra coaching to help him develop."

"Same with Seider," Kuhl continues. "When he was 14, he was practicing maybe twice a week, and when he came to us he was able to practice twice a day. You could see how fast he developed and even now you can see how he's getting better every day. What he has done in the last 5 years has been unbelievable."

"I remember when I first travelled to Canada, (Sidney) Crosby was still playing in Rimouski and there were 10,000 spectators waiting to see this guy play," Fiscoeder recalls. "Everyone knew this kid was the next Great One, but if you see these kinds of players in your organization, your job is not to destroy these guys."

"When I see Leon, we still joke around about his backcheck, so when he was with us he knew exactly what he needed to work on," Fiscoeder continues. "It was a pretty easy job as a coach. Let them play and enjoy and pressure the other guys to support their development by working hard against them in practice."

Players at Jungadler Mannheim also have Goc's 600+ NHL games to reflect on, including suiting up with Crosby in Pittsburgh.

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**"He is a great example," Goc states. "When he goes out on the ice to practice, I was just like 'wow, he works in practice.' He's not just waiting for the coach to blow the whistle and get off the ice. He does every drill right, when he goes to the net he wants to score and that's what he does in the game as well."**

"He puts the work in in the summertime and during the season so I tell my guys I've seen this guy do it," he says. "You're good right now but if you want to make it to the next level you have to keep doing it and don't be satisfied with where you are right now. Somebody else is going to put in the work and they will roll past you at some point."

The time Draisaitl or Seider or Stutzle spent there will have an impact far longer than their actual games played in the program.

"Draisaitl is pretty famous now, since he won MVP people know a lot more about him," Valenti admits. "Of course, we have soccer is Germany that is the king of sports, but now we are seeing hockey players and basketball players playing pro in North America and it's nice to have."

"You get a couple guys like Seider or Stutzle who lead the way and you see a bunch of other kids that want to follow," reflects Dave Tomlinson, a German hockey hero in his own right. "For young German players they have more players for them to look at and follow, along with doing so well at the World Juniors and the World Championships that has sparked that on."

Tomlinson spent six seasons with the parent Adler Mannheim program, after a career in North America that included stints with the Toronto Maple Leafs, Winnipeg Jets and Florida Panthers, along with over 340 AHL/IHL games.

Tomlinson, now the colour commentator for the NHL's newest franchise, the Seattle Kraken, will remember his time with Mannheim well.

"I loved it there. Mannheim was really well run, it was run as close as you could to an NHL or minor pro team," Tomlinson shares. "I realized if you score early in the season, you're a fan favourite and every top team will be after you. The Germans fans are really passionate. They love their chants and songs so they will create a song for their star players. My song was a take off of 'Mrs. Robinson', they would sing

'score a goal Mr. Tomlinson', so you'd have 11 thousand German fans singing and banging on drums so how does that not make you totally pumped?"

Fiscoeder will take no credit for anyone or anything. He doesn't even give himself many props for his 17 championships, including a story when he left the rink right after winning a championship to play soccer with his daughter.

But it's not just the players Fiscoeder points to as the rising stars in Germany.

Marcel Goc gets high praise from everyone I spoke with, a rising star in the coaching ranks in Germany, if he wants it.

"Marcel is such a good guy, such a hard working guy," Fiscoeder praises. "I have not met a lot of pro players who are that focused, that professional, his preparation for practices and I tell him all the time, you don't know what kind of power you have in German hockey, if you want to be the #1 guy you can do that in two-to-three years. You can make a big difference."

#### THE CHALLENGE

"Our big problem in Germany is soccer," Valenti says unequivocally. "With soccer you just need shoes and a ball, and you can play almost anywhere. In Germany, hockey is pretty expensive, and we don't have the ice available for them."

"We are trying to recruit more players. In the top league they have recruiting programs where at the games they give kids 7, 8, 9 years old the chance to go out on the ice and have a "day in the life" with the club," Valenti shares. "We are in the schools, we will go into kindergarten, and we bring them on the ice, teach them how to skate."

"The program German Federation changed for junior hockey. Even if you are in the smallest city and have an ice rink that's just for fun or you're in a professional league, there's a guideline of what to do," he continues. "We have the development program for coach's standard is getting higher and higher and now we have more and more players coming to the NHL, so there's a chance with social media you have a chance to see all those players and for young kids they have these heroes now helps a lot."

Tomlinson knows how hard it is to get German players, from his time playing overseas. But from where he's standing now, he sees the growth continuing.

"I think the new buildings have been awesome and that they are building new arenas. It seems like the top teams continue to be the top teams, but I do think Germany itself is making a good argument for being considered amongst the Finlands, Swedens and Czech Republics because they have more depth and more ability to compete with some of these bigger countries."

For Fiscoeder, it's simple. "We need more players. It's too ex-



pensive here for skills coaches in kids hockey," he admits. "You can play soccer for 60 euros a year, you get support from the German Football Association, so for us there was always this important thing of having the dual system where we are helping with the school and the hockey."

#### AFTER THE GAME

"If you are a national team player in Germany and you do nothing wrong, you have no injuries, everything goes perfectly and you have a great career, you maybe have your house paid for, you maybe have a million euros on your bank account, but that doesn't mean you won't have to work the rest of your life."

Fischoeder, along with everyone in the Mannheim program, doesn't waste any time to introduce the idea that not every player in the room is going to make the DEL.

"There's not too many big hockey towns around Mannheim, so the range of area from where kids come from is fairly big," Goc explains. "The combination of school and hockey, making sure both are good for the players is structured really well here and that's one thing as a parent you're looking for."

"The main work is taking care of the person and their personality development," Fischoeder praises. "When you work in an organization like this it's taking care of people, hockey is important but more important is the responsibility you have that these kids feel comfortable."

"You never know, if the hockey part is not where they end up going with their career, you don't want to end up with nothing," Goc confirms. "In case hockey doesn't work the dual development making sure they are set with school and have good grades and preparing them for life, essentially, outside of hockey. How they treat hockey is how they will treat everything."

Fischoeder has billeted several kids over his time as coach of Jungadler Mannheim. He gave the program 20 years of his life.

"I still come into the arena in Mannheim and hug everybody and feel comfort-

“**NOT EVERY KID CAN BE A PRO HOCKEY PLAYER, BUT THE FOCUS IS ON THE PERSON THEMSELVES. IF THEY ARE WILLING TO WORK, WE ARE ABLE TO DO SOMETHING WITH THEM.**”

able after 20 years how much it's meant to me," Fischoeder says. "I built a house in Mannheim; I married my wife here and my daughter was born here, so I will always live here. I was 28 when I stepped into Mannheim, that's a long life here and this is a big part and I love the organization and what they gave to me and the opportunity they gave me."

"I've had a chance to see hockey all over the world and not a lot of people have had this chance."

"The youth program made a huge difference for me, for sure," Stutzle beams. "What a great coaching staff and guys like Frank, they just want to make young kids better and get them to the pro team, and that's what they've been doing so far. It was some of the best years of my life being there."

Stutzle and the rest of the players of Jungadler Mannheim have had the unique opportunity to see beyond their walls. To see hockey in Sweden, Finland, Switzerland, Russia, the USA and Canada.

Their greatest gift to us, has been bringing the spotlight back to the blossoming hockey hot bed that is Germany.



## THE STORY BEHIND

# JOKERIT

What kid didn't play cops and robbers when they were young?

You and your band of thieves stole any number of items: money, diamonds, or perhaps even something more sacred, another kid's toy.

The other group upheld the law, bringing the crooks down in a good old fashioned footrace, tag them and right to jail they went.

We played that until the streetlights came on. Hours on end.

Students at the Jokerit skating school are playing the same game today, just on ice.

"The best way to teach skating was trying to keep it as playful and enjoyable as possible," says Tuomas Taskinen, Jokerit U13 head coach. "When you're teaching a skill at the very basic level it's not good to have a competition. You need to have basic knowledge and skills so you are able to compete, but quite often it gets competitive because of the kids that are involved and it fires them up."

The Jokerit skating school starts with boys as young as four-years-old and entertains them with games like "Who's Afraid of the Ice

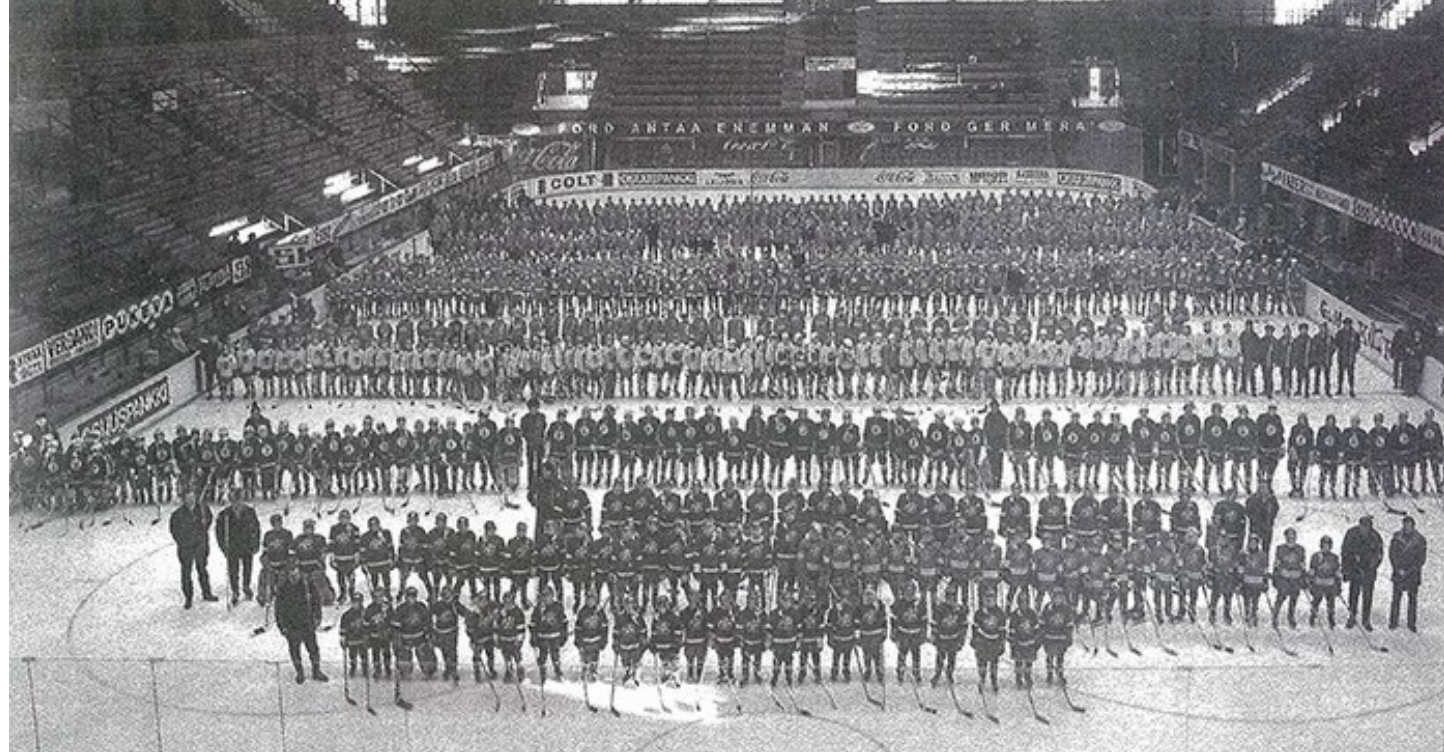
Man" or their own version of Red Bull Crushed Ice courses with fire hoses, small boards and other obstacles in their way.

Taskinen has taken on the U13 coaching role after going through the ranks with each age group, starting with U7, when the Jokerit program first begins.

"When we start at the beginning of the season, if we have 50 kids, maybe a third of them are ok with skating," explains Mikko Nurminen, Jokerit Director of Youth Coaching. "Then there's a middle group who can move, and you can start doing things with them. Then there's the group who can't skate at all."

"We try to get the last group moving so they can participate and once we do that, we start doing fun games like tag or cops and robbers. We try to be very supportive and make it fun, so they want to keep going."

For some, their experience with Jokerit may end at skating school as they choose to try other sports. For others, they will spend the



next decade of their lives growing through Finland's most prestigious hockey development program.

The Joke of the Jokers began in 1967.

Junior hockey has always been an important part of the Jokers for the last 50 years, when the program captured its first Finnish Junior Championship in 1973.

Finland, a hockey crazy country to say the least, couldn't get enough.

The junior leagues started to fill up and ultimately the idea of a skating school became reality in November of 1994. Since then, thousands of players over 30 years have fallen in love with the game through the supportive approach of the Jokerit coaches and instructors.

Players who graduate from the skating school could make their move into the U7 program and onwards, with the Jokerit juniors rounding out at U20.

As the Director of Youth Coaching, Nurminen is their first point of contact.

"It's one of the best things in my job, Saturday morning skating school," Nurminen says. "Most of the time they are really happy, but they are also really honest, so it's a positive challenge to make them feel comfortable."

"One of the big things that I like with Jokerit is that the hockey directors want to underline the values of the club and that goes not only with the coaches and players, but also with parents," Taskinen adds. "We talk to them about how they should support their kids. It's ok if in U7 there's a Saturday morning where the kid is tired and he's not willing to come to practice. It's ok, we don't push it too hard, we'll try next week."

## From then on, it's constant development.

"I think we have tried to help the kids go as far as possible," Nurminen states. "At the beginning it should be really fun and still make you better every day, so we try to introduce new things and bring that in as we challenge ourselves to do things a bit earlier or what is the right order.

"The first games we have are in U7, but it's half ice until U10," Taskinen ex-

plains. "If you look at the big picture, the period they are in that range there are three main goals: they have good skills in skating and stickhandling, so they can carry the puck and lift their head and see where they are going, and that their attitude towards the game is positive."

That is done methodically, they are not throwing information at kids from all directions and are not necessarily trying to develop the best 10-year-olds in the country.

## Their development process is deliberate, it's functional and it's direct.

Any feedback given to the players in that age group at that time is specifically focused on the type of area they are trying to improve with that practice or drill.

"Once the boys go to full ice, we approach teaching hockey in four ways from a game point of view," Taskinen shares. "Offence with the puck, offence without the puck, defending the puck carrier, and defending the player who doesn't have the puck."

"I think it's helped that we only focus on the goals and feedback from that particular area," he continues. "If we are trying to improve their game as a puck carrier and we give them feedback on their defending, it mixes up everything."

Their timelines at first could catch a North American-ized parent off guard. Taskinen would go on to explain they don't start teaching how to defend the player without the puck until U12.

In some circles around North America, there are teams watching kids that age in some form of recruiting. When I asked Taskinen which of the four parts of the game was the easiest to grasp, his answer was no surprise.

"The kids want to have the puck," he said. "The second easiest is how they are defending against the guy who has the puck, because they want to get the puck. When we go to full ice, we talk about how you should move on the ice when you are playing forward, how you can help the player who has the puck with your movement. The hardest is getting them the idea that it's really hard

to defend if you're looking at the puck because usually the puck carrier is not the most dangerous person in our zone."

## That message is consistent throughout their growth for players within the Jokerit club because, for the most part, from U7 to U12 they have the same coach.

Nurminen runs the hockey schools and skating schools and will be the U7 head coach until January or February of that season. It's then handed off to a parent coach or someone who may stay with that group over the next few years.

It creates a line of communication and level of comfort between the coaches, players and parents that is at the heart of Jokerit's success.

"What we have tried to tell them, from the very beginning, is we have praised effort," Taskinen says. "If nobody makes a mistake in a hockey game, that would be a very dull game. What I would like to see when they are on the ice is they show effort, which creates competitiveness, and it gives them tools to face adversity because there will be that in many aspects of their life."

"The other thing we have underlined many times is don't be afraid of mistakes," he continues. "If you make a mistake, don't worry about that, I've done that a thousand times, so has Michael Jordan. But the idea is when we make a mistake, we try not to worry about it, but we talk afterwards about what we can do differently, but what is done is done, the past is what it is, and we try to control the things that are controllable."

Skill development takes the lead at every age level you examine with Jokerit, but you see it start to take off around the U13 level.

Back in 2013, the Finland Ice Hockey Federation launched a skills coach project. It was a three year investment leading up to the World Championship to try to start improving junior hockey across the country.

Essentially, the Federation paid 50% of the full-time skills coach's salary, while the club paid the rest.

The program has been extremely successful, now entering its ninth season.

"It has helped a lot because we've been able to hire someone for that role and the fact that we have more people who are full-time is a big thing for us," says Olli-Pekka Yrjanheikki, Jokerit's Director of Coaching. "The more important thing is how it brings our cooperative clubs closer to Jokerit. We have great relationships with our cooperative clubs and Jokerit is aiming to have the best players from those clubs when they are U15 and U16."

Each program who takes advantage of the project is required to have a cooperative club network; Jokerit has nine clubs and over 3,000 players within their system.

Their slogan: "Developing together the quality and image of local hockey."

Teemu Poussa is the man who has benefitted as skills coach for Jokerit.

He spends a large portion of his time working with the three cooperative clubs in his region and with the U12s, and onward with the parent club.

"We are trying to coach those players in game situations and go more in depth," Poussa says. "We have some goals in every role that we are trying to progress year after year. Our big goal when they move from my phase to U16 is

that they have certain skills in every role."

When Poussa starts working with the players is when they are hoping to grasp all four concepts of the game and be able to play that way all over the ice.

"We are trying to concentrate on one skill or one role in a practice, so then we have a certain skill or thing that we want to see from that practice," Poussa explains. "We will create competition in practices, we will score points or do bets for their age group and post winners on Instagram and it really helps. We plan our practices in a good way to include the things we want to see from those roles."

"Sometimes we think too much about the games; my opinion is the practice matters," Poussa continues. "We are normally playing once a week in my age group and my U15 program practices four times a week, so that's why it matters what we are doing in practice and how can we develop those skills. We create different environments – sometimes you have one minute left and you're one goal behind, so my vision is practicing those situations, so they are ready when they do play games for those scenarios."

“

**...THE DREAM IS TO BRING A KID THROUGH SKATING SCHOOL TO THE KHL ONE DAY."**

"Winning should matter in the practices," Poussa delivers. "As an example, 2v2 is the best game, in my opinion. You can't hide there. If you want to score you have to help and if you need to defend you have to know how to defend both guys. So, then we look at how we help the puck carrier, how we create 2 on 1 situations in every area of the game, how are we scanning the ice and understanding the game; does the puck carrier need help in the attacking zone?"

Poussa sees his role as coaching the coaches. A theme that is echoed throughout everyone in Jokerit's front office.

"Working with both our big club and the cooperative clubs it's important we have a goal in mind," Poussa points out. "We have the cooperative clubs, and we have coach education with all of those coaches too, to help them learn and grow. I would say the biggest thing is that I see these coaches and teams weekly, so we see how they have done, how the players are developing."

## Overseeing a large group of players, coaches and teams means communication has to be at the forefront.

That's where Poussa and Nurminen collaborate.

"Mikko and I write the weekly message for the coaches," Poussa explains. "It has our schedule, will talk about the last week and there's also coaching notes

that could be a video or an article. I think that's been a really good part and it's been a great way to bring some research and opinions to everyone."

"It's communication from us to the teams, but it's also to the parents, and from the teams back to us," Nurminen includes. "The best teams and coaching groups we have work with communication. We have about 500 players in Jokerit if you count the hockey school, so there are a lot of different opinions. We have to communicate really well."

Jokerit also has a secret weapon in its back pocket.

A man who created a career for himself on the ice, but in a different sport.

For many Canadians, Victor Kraatz is a legend.

The 10-time World Champion figure skater captured hearts across the country, with partner Shae-Lynn Bourne, from 1992-2003, just missing the podium at two Olympic Winter Games.

After his skating career concluded, Kraatz put that part of his life behind him. But he always came back to the ice.

"I went back to school and was studying marketing," Kraatz explains. "When I stopped competing as an athlete, I sort of said 'that's it' and walked away. I did that partially because I needed to find out who I was."

"I was working for the Vancouver Whitecaps and at the time they had a coach who was giving our organization a pep talk and I'm sitting there thinking 'what am I doing?' I went home and there were all these ideas in my head. So, in 2010 I did some Olympic coverage for CTV and was watching the hockey games and I was just trying to think of how to get started."

Chance meetings seemed to have followed Kraatz since then.

While working at the North Shore Winter Club in North Vancouver, Kraatz was approached with the suggestion of working with a young player, who he didn't know at the time. They set up a meeting and a relationship was born.

"The kid showed up and it was Mathew Barzal," Kraatz tells. "At the time he was playing for Seattle and so I said 'let's work on stuff and you tell me if you want to do this or focus on something else and let's see if this is a good match or if you are way beyond my skills and then we just walk away.'"

"We always kept the door open that if either of us feel like we are out of each

other's leagues we just walk away, but it never happened," Kraatz remembers. "Right away, I was thrown into this opportunity because he's so intense and hard working. That's how my name was thrown out there and word got around. It was his first year with the New York Islanders and he won NHL Rookie of the Year and we had a few more sessions after that. I still text him to see how he's doing, and it's become a really special relationship."

In another occurrence, Kraatz was invited to put on a clinic in Helsinki and afterwards was asked if he would be interested in doing some work for a team. The two parties exchanged information and a few months later, they reconnected, and he was offered an opportunity to join the club.

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## That meeting happened to be with Kim Borgstrom, Jokerit junior club President.

"When I met him and learned why he was moving to Finland, I told the board that we have to keep him," says Borgstrom. "Victor has brought a lot of knowledge to the club, it's interesting to see how he was doing things in North America. He was one of the best skaters in the world. All the players I know that have worked with Victor, love him."

"The one thing that Jokerit always pride themselves in is being a fast team," Kraatz details. "Carrying the puck as fast as they can to get into the O-Zone, so that is always in the back of my mind. The danger of that is when you have kids spinning their feet, they are very agile, but they are not able to cover the ice. The balancing act is you need kids who are agile and moving their feet, but they still need to be able to cover the ice."

"Balance is key in a lot of ways. I don't want to be the same as a coach, I want to learn new skills and you do that by watching other people or listening to other people," Kraatz says. "I don't want athletes to think 'I know skating is important, but what does that mean if I can't handle the puck.'"

"You can run a fitness class and do drills down the ice until you're blue in the face but how does that translate to a game like scenario. It's always with the intent of being game relatable. I see too often where coaches will do some crazy stuff and think 'wow that's fantastic but is it going to hold up in a game.'"

This is Kraatz's third season with the club. It's a completely different dynamic of players and styles from Finland to North America, and Kraatz credits the people within Jokerit for making this such a smooth transition.

"The coaches are always open to suggestions or questions that I have, and I would say 'this is what we would do in Canada' and he would come back with 'yeah, that wouldn't work here,'" Kraatz shares. "So, you learn their coaching philosophy and we'll tweak it and that gives me a great opportunity to learn about their hockey culture and it's a great overlap of me learning a lot from them and hopefully vice versa."

"I'm here for a very precise mandate – keep



the kids fast, keep them agile, teach them the technique, draw from past experiences and whatnot," Kraatz explains. "With the younger kids you simplify it. Generating power, changing directions, quick steps but always with the puck. With the older guys, there are two kinds – the player who has been a professional for a long time and there we try to make them as good as they can be at that stage, and then the younger guys who are still learning multiple different ways to do things at a high speed. It's more detail oriented, but I leave their certain style and my task is to find the way to make them the best they can be."

It speaks to Kraatz's coaching style, knowledge and skill to not only have success in his previous career, but to translate that into hockey.

But that doesn't mean it's been all smooth.

"I remember we did this one drill with Matt and he said to me 'I want you to pass me the puck' and I'm going back to him, 'no I don't think you want that,' Kraatz laughs. "But he comes back to me with 'it's actually good, I've got to get a shitty pass sometimes.'"

"There are plenty of skills coaches in Finland so there must be something I'm doing that makes me stand out and I'm never tired of learning for that reason," Kraatz follows up. "With a team setting, I ask questions, I ask why and try to fill in the blanks for some of the intent because I didn't play hockey at a high level. That has worked fantastic and the trust we have in the organization is incredible."

You speak with any member of the coaching staff within Jokerit and the message is the same.

It's remarkably impressive how from age seven to age 20, the development model stays consistent.

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## Consistency is key for this club, and they've had plenty of it – starting from the top.

President Kim Borgstrom has been with the board for 30 years, Mikko Nurminen seven years, Tuomas Taskinen around the same.

And Olli-Pekka Yrjanheikki has been a member of Jokerit for a decade.



Yrjanheikki, who thankfully did not ask me to attempt to pronounce his last name, is affectionately known as "OP."

As the Director of Coaching, OP (top left in photo above) oversees the coaching staff under three values – cooperating, continuing development and commitment.

"Five years ago, we identified how the team would play, four years ago it was how to help individual players improve their skills and now, for the last two years, we have talked about leadership and how we communicate with players," Yrjanheikki explains. "That wouldn't have been possible if we didn't have all these coaches here for so long. Coaches are one of the best assets of the club. The big thing is the board of directors have the patience to give us time to make progress in our development. For instance, Tero Määttä (U20) is in his fourth season, Niko Halttunen (U18) his fifth season and Tuomas Kalliomäki (U16) is in his 11th season with the club.

"Jokerit has had great coaches and great players throughout its history," Yrjanheikki admits. "But every age group had been a different unit 10 years ago. Now we have a group of coaches not just for an age group. They follow our age

groups. Every team knows what the players in our system are doing and what the players can do as they go through the program. The club culture has gotten stronger because of that.

“We have a community of coaches, not just a group of coaches,” Yrjanheikki continues. “We meet quite often with our coaches, and we discuss our values. All the coaches can discuss and decide what appropriate action we need to take. What does the goalie coach do to achieve those values? What does the head coach do to match those values? Then, the coaches can see their opinions are being heard.

“The brand of Jokerit is big, but we are a small club so it’s easy to affect things and change things pretty quickly. The organization is flat and agile for decision making,” Poussa celebrates. “We have really good coaches and that really motivates me. The best thing about it is this still doesn’t feel like work. The environment is what makes Jokerit so special.

“Coaching is organized so that most of the coaches in Finland and our team are father coaches until U13-14 and then there will be pro coaches,” Taskinen includes. “There are several workshops for the coaches every year, Teemu is on the ice once a week and the idea is not so much to teach the kids, but to have a conversation with coaches and spur them on. I think for the past 10 years the club itself has organized really well and that is one of the key things that separates us from other teams.”

Yrjanheikki and Jokerit have a competence-based framework for coaches. It’s how they are evaluated and how coaches can identify where they want to improve.

## It consists of self-development skills, people skills and substance skills.

“My main goal is that we have the best coaches in our different levels and that the teams know every day counts, so we see the individual player improves here,” Yrjanheikki explains. “We can monitor that improvement many other ways: by how players are improving, how our teams succeed and how many national team players we have. Those are the things that will prove if we are doing a good job or not.

“The atmosphere within the coaches is the main thing, for me,” he continues. “The fact that we have the opportunity to keep the same coaches here. I like to think talented players are willing to come to Jokerit because we are famous for the way we treat players and how we communicate. It is our job to show the players how to live the professional lifestyle. How to sleep, how to work in school, how to take care of themselves. It’s so important that they communicate with us, their teammates and coaches and that they can listen to feedback even if it’s negative. When that player looks in the mirror, he knows that he is the one person responsible for his career.”

Jesper Tarkiainen is one who could tell you a better story about Jokerit than I could.

He lived it – from skating school all the way to the University of Vermont, where he’s currently enrolled in his freshman year.

The format worked for him.

“It was very easy because all the friends are the same and we go from year to year with the same group and same coaches, so that makes it easier,” Tarkiainen

explains. “For us, it was in U15 when two groups got together into one team and when there were actually cuts and it started getting real and competitive. Before that, we played as two groups and there’s a lot more guys in the program until that point.”

The trademarks of a Finnish hockey player are their speed and their skill, which has suited Tarkiainen throughout his development.



“We were always skilled, always staying on the puck, we never dumped the puck, and we were always taught to stay on the puck as long as you can, try to make a play instead of just giving it up,” he says. “We did a lot of skating and a lot of edge work, all the way from skating school until when I was done with the program – more skill than grind. I enjoyed playing that style, I was always a smaller guy growing up, so that was good for me.”

Tarkiainen won a national championship at the U15 level and in his second season with the U18s. Now playing for Todd Woodcroft in Vermont, he says a lot of what he was taught as a kid has translated.

“I think the biggest thing is in every practice the level you have to perform in is always high,” he states. “You always have to give your best and if you give bad passes or don’t move your feet, you hear about it. Every practice you have to be good and that’s the mindset that Jokerit taught me.”

Tarkiainen is a model of what Jokerit is hoping becomes the norm.

Introduce them to skating, get them playing in their younger years, progress through the system and one day, hopefully join their big club in the Kontinental Hockey League.

Jokerit is the first Finnish team to join the KHL, which they did in 2014. Of the 24 member clubs in the KHL, 19 of them are based in Russia.

Since joining the KHL, the team has qualified for the playoffs every year, but has not advanced past the 2nd round.

To do that, the hope of all involved with Jokerit is that it will be their own players that fill that roster – but there’s a tough bridge to gap.

“The negative thing is we are struggling to keep our most talented players when they are 19 or 20-years-old,” Yrjanheikki explains. “They are thinking

it’s too big a step to go from U20 to KHL, so they will go to Liga teams or North America, but the dream is to bring a kid through skating school to the KHL one day.”

Club president Kim Borgstrom agrees.

**“Our goal is to see Jokerit junior players take the next step to get into the KHL. You have to take a step somewhere else to get into the KHL right now, but that is one thing I’d like to see one day. The step from U20 to the KHL is huge, but on a big scale, I want to see more Jokerit players on the KHL team.”**

Janne Vuorinen lives that challenge every day.

As Director of Player Personnel (essentially Assistant GM for the KHL Jokerit club), his role is to hire coaches and recruit players to the U20 and KHL club. He also oversees the junior organization and coaching managers.

“During the time Jokerit has been in the KHL, I think we’ve put even more focus on the junior system and we’ve invested more money on the coach’s side,” Vuorinen says. “It’s a little bittersweet that sometimes the benefit goes to some other team because we create good players that play for other Finnish teams, but more and more in the coming years, more Jokerit players will be coming to the KHL team.”

“As an organization we would be very proud if some of our players were in our skating schools and went all the way up to our U20 program,” Vuorinen continues. “I think that’s a big accomplishment for our system and all of our coaches who have helped that player along the way. If they do leave, we try to stay in contact with them and keep those relationships with the players so if they develop for the KHL level, then we can bring them back and they can still be proud of the Jokerit program and their journey with our junior teams.”

Vuorinen sees coaching stability and development as keys to getting those players there.

“The team first mentality comes right away, we tell them in U7 we have to

do this together and that doesn’t matter if it’s between the coaches in U7 or the KHL team, they need to work together,” Vuorinen assures. “They really understand the Jokerit logo is the main thing. We believe if we work together, it’s much easier for each individual to improve and move on with their careers. The main thing is we want to have a good character team and a good team chemistry. We don’t want to hire good players if they are bad people.”

Vuorinen’s boss is one of the most well-known people in the country. His name also carries a lot of weight in Canada, especially in Edmonton, Alberta.

Jari Kurri played in Edmonton for 10 seasons, helping the Oilers win five Stanley Cups in that time, amassing 1,043 points along the way.

After his Hall of Fame playing career, Kurri returned home and worked as a General Manager with the Finnish National team.

In 2013, he came back to his roots, joining Jokerit as their GM and President of the men’s team.

“It’s a great story for myself when I started as a nine-year-old joining Jokerit,” Kurri remembers. “When this opportunity came, I thought ‘wow, this is perfect



for me! Also, joining the KHL team and having to learn how to play in that league, it was a challenge that I really enjoyed. To come to Jokerit in this role, it's great. I enjoy every day."

While Kurri's job is to build up the KHL team, he sees the work being done at the junior level and looks forward to seeing the fruits of those labours as the players start stepping into their professional careers.

"I think it's great we have coaches that stay with the kids for three or four years, they then know the players and they have an open mind," Kurri believes. "All the coaches are together, on the ice or in the office, so we learn from each other."

"It's good for us that our coaches discuss with the junior coaches and try to bring what the game is about at this level and figuring out what direction the game is going and what type of players you need," Kurri agrees. "I think in the last few years our program has gotten really good in the juniors. They are putting a lot of effort into improving the junior program and hiring good coaches and I think it's going in the right direction."

"We have gotten respect in the league that Jokerit is a good hockey club and tough to play against. It's good for us that we are building a reputation like that."

Kurri has his own goals for the KHL club, ones that any GM would look for.

"We have had good success in the regular season, but we need to get that next step in the playoffs," Kurri states. "It's not easy because if we go past the 1st round, we are going to face the top team in the league, so it's not easy to get past there, but that's our goal now."

You cannot develop players, under the same model, with similar skill sets from age six to age 19 without the three C's that Yrjanheikki had described earlier: cooperating, continuing development and commitment.

"That's the fuel for me. To see how the guys develop and now as they grow from boys to young men, to have those connections are so important," Taskinen recalls. "I remember when I was their age the mentality was the coach was a big authority and that you never started a conversation with a coach. So to create an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect is great; I'm more than pleased when some of the guys start joking with me – not at me – but with



me and I think that shows there is a trust and that is really important."

"The big thing for us is we want to emphasize our coaches," Vuorinen explains. "OP, Teemu and Mikko are doing a great job with that. We see what kind of hockey is happening at the best level and we try to develop players to be ready for that, and same with our coaches."

"I take a lot of pride that the coaches and employees really like the organization and want to stay with us. If they can get a better spot for their career we are happy for them, but we are very proud when they want to stay with Jokerit."

"For me, it's in my heart," Borgstrom shares. "It's like a family. Both of my older brothers played for Jokerit. My son's NHL agent played with my brother. It's great to see old guys come back. It's a big family. It's my lifestyle."

The fire that coaches are trying to develop in their players is obvious within them, as well.

"I'm competitive in a way," Nurminen admits. "If I feel there is someone at another club doing something great, I challenge myself to become better. I want to be the best at what I do. I take pride in our program and what we do here. I want this to be the greatest hockey program, doing what we do. That gets me going."

"OP knows a lot about the game, he studies all the time," Poussa points out right away when asked who he's learned from along the way. "He has to be one of the best in Finland, from the junior side. From Mikko, I've learned how to communicate with the parents and other people in the organization. I want to see Jokerit be the best player developer in the next three years. I don't have huge aspirations, but I want to be the best skills coach for these age groups."

And with NHL Hall of Famers, lifetime coaches and a country filled with alumni, the man who oversees this historic junior program can't help but go back to the beginning himself.

"Hockey is a way of life for me. I just love hockey, it's not a place of work for me. I get inspired when I think I have helped a player or a coach somehow or someway," Yrjanheikki says with a smile. "Whenever I have a feeling that I have helped a player or coach, that brings me joy and that's why I'm here."



## THE STORY BEHIND

# FRÖLUNDA HC

We've spent the last four editions of this series talking about programs built from the ground up.

What does the view look like from the top down?

How did a team with three Le Mat trophies (the reward for winning the SHL Championship) as of 2005, change its mindset and return gracefully back to the top?

Frölunda is hockey lore.

Västra Frölunda introduced hockey into its program in 1944. The club went back and forth from the Gothenburg League and Division 3, 2 and 1 for most of the 50s.

They won Division 1 multiple times throughout the 60s, their last being in 1965, before some lean years in the 70s and becoming the independent Västra Frölunda Hockey Club in 1984.

In 2003, after 38 years, Frölunda was crowned Swedish Champions again. Two years later, champions once more – for a third time in team history.

After that, the team struggled.

From 2009–2013, the team finished as high as fifth once and did

not make the second round of the playoffs, including missing the SHL playoffs entirely in 2010–11.

In 2013–14, the program went in a different direction – a franchise altering direction.

They looked to their academy to set the tone; they started from the ground up to pave their road to future success.

It was the academy where they would find their future stars, their philosophies and The Frölunda Way.

To do that, they needed a new regime. To begin that build from within, they found a missing piece from the outside.

That piece was Roger Rönberg.

Roger Rönberg wins.

He coached Sweden's National Team to a World Championship bronze medal in 2008–09 and 2009–10, followed up by a silver medal in 2010–11, before capturing World Junior gold in 2011–2012 and silver the following year.

After coaching Luleå in the SHL League, Rönberg took on the



tional team challenge and helped grow the Swedish program into one that can almost always be counted on to be there when the dust settles in any world championship.

A self-proclaimed nerd in every way, Rönnberg thinks differently than a lot of coaches in the national spotlight.

**“I think the X’s and O’s are one part and that’s important for all coaches, but I’m more into the leadership and psychology of the game,” Rönnberg admits. “How can I be a better leader to lead different people, because that’s the challenge. If I can have the skills in my leadership to be a leader for as many different people as possible.”**

He goes as far as calling the hiring of a psychology coach for Frölunda “the best thing I’ve ever done.”

“It’s so important when you work on developing humans that you don’t look for certain type of people to bring into the program. We think we can help every person to grow their character and we have our role models in the men’s team who have tremendous character to help them.”

Rönnberg came to Frölunda with a plan.

Instead of paying out for costly, high risk free agents, Rönnberg wanted to develop their own players, in Gothenburg, and teach them the Frölunda Way.

“It was my biggest mission, that’s why I signed up to go to Frölunda,” Rönnberg details. “It was an unusual approach when you are recruiting, it wasn’t just about winning, but building a winning culture in the whole club and setting a new vision and values for the whole organization.”

“Developing humans is the most important aspect. It’s more important than winning.”

That mindset was taken in by the first team and set as the standard for Frölunda’s growth.

“This is how we do things on the first team, this is how our program is going to success from our youngest teams.”

Rönnberg is not just a preacher of development, of the human side first. He is one of its most active participants.

He “nerds” out to podcasts, books, anything he can get his hands on to improve his leadership skills and his people skills.

For him, that’s the greatest advantage.

And to get there, the first stop is looking inside yourself.

“You have to learn your own habits,” Rönnberg shares. “What kind of bias do I have and why do I have them? What are my core beliefs? Those two things are how I see the world and then finding a way to get better at knowing what the

reality really is, I can be a better leader and face different people in different situations.”

“It’s from the beginning,” he emphasizes. “You’ve got to know yourself. Things like, how you react under stress or in different situations. That’s where you find where you need to be better and improve your leadership skills.”

Rönnberg set out to change Frölunda forever, despite the program having such a rich history. His goal is individual development, working hard, practicing hard and growing together, with winning a part of that growth.

The team that was assembled with him had the same frame of mind.

Mikael Strom is at the forefront of development.

Since 2012-13, Strom has been the general manager of Frölunda’s U16, U18 and U20 programs. He is also the club’s Director of Player Development.

Strom and his respective coaching staffs begin working within the academy with a goal that one day these players will impact the first team, and beyond.

“When they are younger it’s important that they can skate, it’s important for us to have the puck and it’s important to take the puck to the goal as quick as possible,” Strom says of the program’s game plan. “We start in a really easy way with the young kids, but in the end it should be along the same line as we play in our first team.”

“We have to take small steps, but we have a system how we want to play. It’s not always that we play in that system every night, but when they grow up there are more and more details we add to the mix.”



“

**THERE’S SOMETHING EXCEPTIONAL HAPPENING WITH FRÖLUNDA. AND NOT JUST ON THE FIRST TEAM, IT FLOWS THROUGHOUT EVERY PLAYER, COACH AND PARENT INVOLVED IN THE CLUB.**

Strom admits throughout practices and making sure the players handle the puck as much as they can growing up, there is a big emphasis on small area games.

But their teaching is not just on results.

“We coach to educate the players, not to win the games,” Strom confirms. “If you skate hard it’s good and if you take the puck to the net it’s good, but if you win or lose, it’s not the most important thing right now. In the future, if you practice well, we will win those games, but at the beginning most important is to practice well.”

“When Roger came to us, the standard in each practice got higher from there,” Strom recalls. “It’s only one way to get better is to practice hard. He is mostly focused on the first team and myself and my coaches are in charge of the younger kids, but we believe in working hard every day, making other players better, knowing every individual player is unique and get them to understand we need each other.”

The next key component came through the ranks of Frölunda as a player and, after his playing career, from their front office.

Fredrik Sjöström played in the Frölunda system up until the 2001 season, when he came to North America to play two years with the Calgary Hitmen of the Western Hockey League.

Before that first season, Sjöström was selected 11th overall by the Phoenix Coyotes in the 2011 NHL Draft.

From there, the speedy, hard working forward suited up in 489 NHL games for Phoenix, the New York Rangers, Calgary Flames and Toronto Maple Leafs.



He finished his playing career back with Frölunda in 2012-13, before taking a scouting role with the club after that year.

“When I retired, probably like a lot of players, you’re not sure what you want to do because you have such a strong identity as a player,” Sjöström admits. “I

got an opportunity to work for the team as a salesman, selling sponsorship and doing a little TV and scouting, a good mix of things with the club. After a year or so working for the team I realized I liked the sports side of the club and work a little more in that.”

Sjöström became the club’s assistant general manager and director of scouting in 2014-15 and continued his accent mid-season 2015-16 when he was chosen as the club’s GM.

“In a way I fell into this, I’ve always loved the game of hockey, but I wasn’t sure if I was going to be any good at this,” Sjöström laughs. “I was willing to work hard and willing to learn and very curious and the club taught me so much. I was given a lot of leeway to try things and taught to look at things in a different way, so it’s just been a great experience for me.”

With Rönnberg, Strom and Sjöström at the helm, and the board of directors on board, the club began its revitalization.

When academy players begin to see their potential, that’s when eyes from above start taking notice.

Frölunda’s association features 17 youth clubs in Gothenburg (the second largest city in Sweden) and produces an outstanding level of talent.

From there, one of the greatest missions of the club is to keep their program local.

**“The most important thing is to recruit players from the Gothenburg area,” Strom admits. “It’s a goal from our club that 90% of the players from the academy program is from Gothenburg area and then 50% of our pro team coming from the academy program.”**

“We are a small country, but Gothenburg is a good area, and we have a great connection with the young clubs, so Gothenburg and Stockholm make up a lot of the players in our country. It’s a big part of what we are trying to do.”

With kids starting with Frölunda between five and six-years-old, Strom estimates the players and families they bring through their system will count 6,000 days from the beginning to the end of their youth program.

“Our coaches are really important for us in that way,” Strom admits. “The youth coaches are welcoming the kids and parents to sport, showing them how to play the right way and helping them as best we can when they grow as players and people.”

“We want to develop everybody in our system, we want every single player that we have to succeed and that looks different for everyone,” Sjöström explains.



"If we can educate them that some guys will play second division, some will play in the SHL and if we do a good job and get lucky, some guys can even make it to the NHL. But that's kind of our motto, we want to develop everybody."

"We have so many good people in this organization, coaches and management for youth and the junior program," Rönnberg says. "My role is to work with the men's team and what we do there can spread into the organization. We have a lot of meetings with everyone about who we are, how we play, how we train and how we want to develop."

For Sjöström, it's about getting the best out of every player that walks through their door.

**"Whether it's a skilled forward or a defensive defenseman, we want to see them succeed as a player and a person. Some people will not get to live on hockey, but they'll get a great education, and they will use that to get a good job somewhere else and they've learned a lot from our education, so it's different levels of succeeding."**

There is a mutual respect amongst the three, something they all account for being extremely important when growing a program of this magnitude.

"Mikael is such a good manager for the youth and junior programs," Rönnberg shares. "He's an expert on what he's doing. We share thoughts and values and we learn from each other and then we will meet with the coaches every week, so it's a constant learning process together."

"I think Roger is an extremely driven coach," compliments Sjöström. "He really wants to work with these young players and help them understand what it takes. He loves working with these young players and challenging them every day. I think we know pretty well what it takes physically to get to the SHL or NHL and then, of course, on the ice what it takes to become a pro. Roger is absolutely instrumental in these kids' development."

"Roger is a really good coach and Fredrik has been here so long too, that we work so well together," Strom adds. "Roger will send information to me and I'll send it to the youth coaches and explain, this is how we want to play. This is the right way for us and then we work with the first team to make sure we are all doing that."

That respect continues up to the board, which Rönnberg says has always had a clear mission.

"The club was looking to develop their organization and that is why I signed up. The management has not only been backing up what we should be doing, they are setting the tone and vision of what we want to be and it's always from the top. My job is to see how we are working on a daily basis within the organization."

As a youngster, Jacob Larsson was one of those players.

"I'm from a small town, they have a hockey team there, but they were not as competitive as Frölunda was, so it was a great chance to go there," Larsson re-

calls. "It's always been a dream to play for a team like Frölunda, it was a pretty easy decision."

Larsson, a native of nearby Ljungby, Sweden, came over to Frölunda in 2013-14, playing parts of four seasons with the club, while being drafted in the 1st round, 27th overall, by the Anaheim Ducks in 2015.

The 6-foot-2 defenseman, who now has over 120 NHL games under his belt, says Frölunda changed the way he played the game.

"Everything in my game got better," Larsson admits. "When I got called up with the big team, they taught me a lot about playing with and without the puck and the structure. They showed me a lot of stuff from moving the puck, defending and all of that."

"They are just really good developing guys," Larsson continues. "When I was a junior player, they had everything I needed. The facility and gym are unreal, you can go on the ice whenever you want. The compete level and practice levels are so high; you learn a lot from that. No one there likes to lose."

For Elmer Söderblom, things started to change once he joined the academy portion of the program.

"When I first came to Frölunda it was like any other team in Gothenburg, but when we turned 15-16, that's when Frölunda starts to show they are better than other teams," Söderblom recalls. "You get into the real program, you get to develop more, practice more, get into the gym and you've got great coaches with a lot of tips and tricks to find ways to get better every day."

Söderblom's brother Arvid is a graduate of the Frölunda program. He signed a contract with the Chicago Blackhawks in 2021 and made his NHL debut on New Year's Day 2022.

Elmer saw what his brother went through with the club, practicing in the morning, going to school during the day and then back on the ice in the afternoon.

He was all in.

"The competitive level from a young age is at such a high level," Söderblom says. "The off-ice and gym part is a big thing. You have to be really fit and strong and well trained in the gym to be able to play in Frölunda, so I think that's a big part as well."

And, as Söderblom mentions a few times in our conversation, it starts with the head coach.

"Roger is just a great coach," Söderblom exclaims. "He's won a lot of titles and he's big here in Gothenburg. He has high demands, and he expects a lot of you, but he has helped me a lot to become a better player and even more a better person."

The younger Söderblom's hockey journey is still somewhat in its infancy.

Elmer was drafted in the 6th round, 159th overall, by the Detroit Red Wings in 2019. The hulking 6-foot-8 forward played with Frölunda's first team this year, but has his eyes on where his hockey path could take him.

"For me, it was real fun to even get drafted, get over to the development camp and show what I've got," Söderblom recalls. "I was proud to go to Detroit, an original six team. It's a great organization with a lot of Swedes there, so it was a really cool team to get to be part of."

A lot of Swedes may be an understatement.

The Red Wings, maybe most famously known for "The Russian Five," have found a home in Sweden in recent years, particularly Frölunda.

In 2019, Detroit selected two Frölunda players: Söderblom and Gustav Berglund.

The next year, they doubled down on the Swedish hockey factory and selected two more: Lucas Raymond with the fourth overall pick, and Theodor

**TOP RED WINGS PROSPECTS IN SWEDEN**

- Skellefteå**  
JONATAN BERGGREN  
16TH IN SHL, SCORING WITH 12-33-45 IN 49 GP
- Rogle**  
MORITZ SEIDER  
11TH AMONG SHL D AND 2ND-BEST U21 SEASON OF ALL TIME BY AN SHL D WITH 7-21-28 IN 41 GP
- Malmö**  
JOE VELENO  
4TH ON TEAM WITH 11-9-20 IN 46 GP
- MODO**  
WILLIAM WALLINDER  
1-5-6 IN 43 GP IN 1ST PRO SEASON
- Malmö**  
MALTE SETKOV  
0-2-2 IN 11 GP; RECENTLY RECALLED AFTER FINISHING 2ND AMONG AIK D-MEN WITH 5-13-18 IN SWEDISH ALLSVENSKAN
- Farjestad**  
ALBERT JOHANSSON  
16TH AMONG SHL D IN GOALS WITH 8-11-19 IN 44 GP
- Frölunda**  
LUCAS RAYMOND  
6-12-18 IN 34 GP; 12ND AMONG U19 SHL PLAYERS
- THEODOR NIEDERBACH**  
2ND IN SWEDISH JUNIOR LEAGUE WITH 13-22-35 IN 19 GAMES FOR FRÖLUNDA, ADDING 3-2-5 IN 20 GP WITH FRÖLUNDA IN THE SHL AND 3-6-9 IN 15 GP WITH MODO IN SWEDISH ALLSVENSKAN
- ELMER SÖDERBLOM**  
3-2-5 IN 28 GP
- Djurgården**  
ALBIN GREWE  
CAREER-BEST 3-3-6 IN 38 GP
- Västerås**  
GUSTAV BERGLUND  
0-5-5 IN 31 GAMES IN 1ST PRO SEASON

Niederbach in the 2nd round.

To complete the hat trick, the Red Wings grabbed Simon Edvinsson sixth overall in the 2021 NHL draft and Liam Dower-Nilsson in the 5th round.

"We have had a great relationship with them for a number of years and there's a few reasons for that," explains Fredrik Sjöström, Frölunda's general manager. "Håkan Andersson has been a great scout for a long time here for Detroit and five-six years ago he was a member of our board, so I've gotten to know him over the years. As well, Detroit has hired Niklas Kronwall on the player development side and I've played against him and played with him. He's a really good person and he's great for these players."

"I think it's been a good club to work with and I think they run a good club, so they are easy to work with."

Having players selected so consistently is a big thing any program would brag about.

Another is when you have the top pick of them all.

Trollhättan, Sweden, is 90 minutes north of Gothenburg.

The small town of 59,000 holds a dam, canal locks and a hydropower station for the Göta älv river, which rolls down to Gothenburg 75 kms away.

That is where Rasmus Dahlin was born.

But Gothenburg, is where he grew up.

The impressive defenseman came to Frölunda in the 2015-16 season to join their U16 program after playing Division 1 and 2 hockey with HC Lidköping.

He climbed the ladder quickly that first year, recording games with the U16, U18 and U20 programs in Frölunda.

After two more seasons with the club, and several international appearances, Dahlin was selected first overall in the 2018 NHL Draft by the Buffalo Sabres.

"It was fantastic, of course," says Rasmus' father, Martin "It was a little unreal because everything went very quick. He moved away from home when he was young to play at Frölunda and that was his dream. His development really took off when he came to the academy."

The senior Dahlin, who has been coaching with the U18 and U20 programs over the past three seasons, knew Frölunda was going to get the best out of his extremely talented son.

"The biggest thing was that he was a skilled, young player and coming to Frölunda, they let him play his style of hockey," Dahlin explains. "He didn't have to change much, he could play his way and be as good a player as he could be. He was always pushed to play his own game and play with confidence and that made him develop all the other parts of his game too."

Now getting to work inside the Frölunda factory, Dahlin sees this with a number of players that come through.

"It's different from player to player and they pick up different things, but in Frölunda it's always hard work," Dahlin stresses. "You really learn to prepare, to practice hard, to always compete every day. The environment here forces you to always push yourself to do your best every day – on the ice, in the gym. We are trying to create an environment to make these players the best they can be."

Dahlin has coached national teams in Sweden and Division 2 and 3 teams throughout his coaching career, but he sees something obvious that separates Frölunda from the rest.



“What stands out in Frölunda is how the players develop their character as an athlete,” Dahlin says. “As a coach here it’s so much fun because everyone is pushing in the same direction. Everyone wants the players and coaches to grow. We have a clear idea of how we want to work and everybody here wants to work hard and develop every day and that creates the environment that is very good for the players.”

Strom recalls great memories of the Dahlins and Raymonds of the world, sharing they all have certain characteristics that made it clear they could be stars.

“The most important thing for us coaches was to let him play and let him have fun and then we will see where he goes,” Strom says. “We can’t say he’s going to the NHL, because from our organization, maybe putting them up a level is better, maybe them being the best at a lower level is a bigger help for his confidence. But, of course, it’s really good for us and we are really happy for them and their success.”

In the early 1990s, Frölunda was the first team in Sweden to practice hard in their youth programs.

There was an understanding of how important that would be for the future of the club.

Bringing in the culture was the next obvious component.

That culture, otherwise known as Roger’s vision when he first arrived, is now Frölunda’s.

And not just the first team, it flows throughout every player, coach and parent involved in the club.

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**“I feel the last 8-9 years, we do it together in the club,” Strom says. “We feel like we are doing it the right way and we talk a lot to each other and we believe in our way to educate our players and our way to play.”**

At the beginning, the results were not there on the scoreboard, but inside those walls it was clear something was changing.

“We know we aren’t going to win each game. We know if we win or lose a few games in a row, we are still going about things the same way,” Strom continues. “If we are worried about losing one game it’s easy for us to change what we do, but we still work the same way together and that’s a really important thing for us.”

“It’s a pretty simple plan,” Sjöström regales.

“I have a goal from the board of 50% of the men’s team we want to be from our own academy. I think it’s important for me, it’s something I strive for every year. It just makes sense. We put a lot of money and resources and energy into our academy, so it wouldn’t make sense to not use it.”

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Frölunda has returned to glory.

They captured Le Mat Trophies in 2016 and 2019.

They are also the most successful franchise in the Champions Hockey League, with four tournament titles since 2015, matched up against the top teams from Europe’s first tier.

But for the coaches, there is still plenty of work to be done.

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**“Right now in Sweden, we have to be humble and say a lot of organizations work in a similar way like us. We are not unique any more,” Rönnerberg reminds. “There are a lot of good organizations out there. It’s harder and harder to be on top. We are chasing the details every day to be better than other clubs.”**

“We’ve built up a good reputation over the years and we want to keep that reputation and that’s not easy,” Sjöström agrees. “A lot of other clubs are doing a great job, so we have stiff competition but we look at ourselves every year, every season to see if we are doing the best job possible. We make sure we have the best development plan for our teams, we look at our competitors to see what they are doing. It’s just a mindset to not be comfortable, always striving to be better and do a better job.”

“It’s never a given, we have stiff competition and a lot of teams are doing good,” Sjöström continues. “I think the day you think you know it all and stop being curious is when you get passed by other clubs. It’s important that we always strive to get better every year. Being humble and working methodically and having people that want to get better is the most important thing.”

And above all, keeping the ties bound between Gothenburg and Frölunda.

“I think our history has been good to us, but we have to look to the future now,” Strom cautions. “A lot of players and a lot of fans know we have a great system and they call us and see if they can start here, but the most important thing is in the local area, it’s important we get them to Frölunda.”

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Now nine years in under Rönnerberg, Sjöström and Strom, Frölunda has focused on dialogue, philosophy and development throughout the club.

Every message is the same, and every action, whether it in the youth program or on the first team, has a standard.

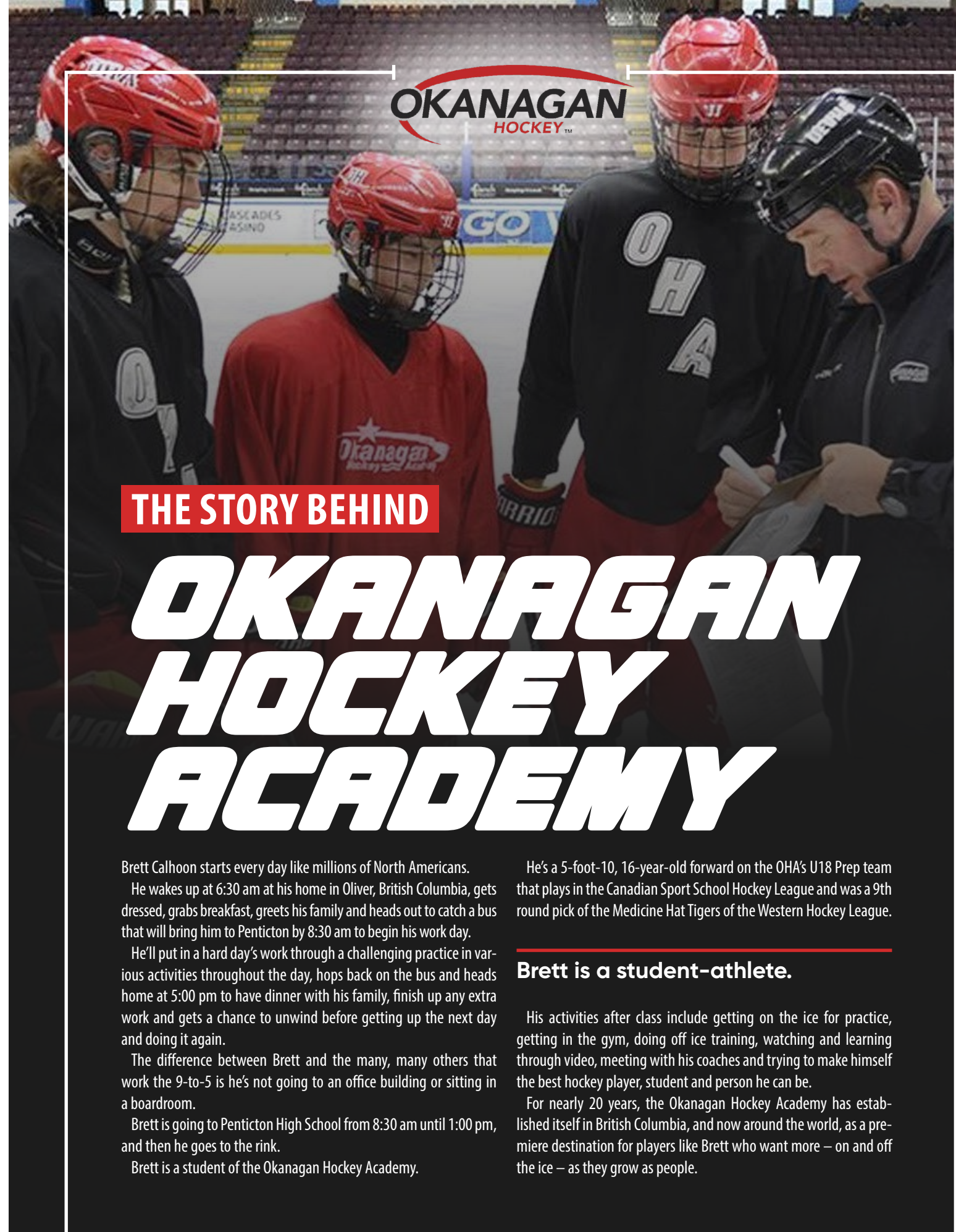
Everything they are doing is for the club.

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**“You need to strive for perfection in every area,” Rönnerberg explains. “We refuse to be second in anything. That’s the push we need and that’s not all in results, that’s what we do on a daily basis.”**

“If I hear another club is working a certain way and it’s working for them, then I push our guys to be better than that club. We have a mantra ‘We should be best in everything that is free’ and that’s a lot of the soft values and how we are working to get the right environment where people find growth.

“It’s a constant process and competition amongst those other organizations.”



## THE STORY BEHIND

# OKANAGAN HOCKEY ACADEMY

Brett Calhoun starts every day like millions of North Americans.

He wakes up at 6:30 am at his home in Oliver, British Columbia, gets dressed, grabs breakfast, greets his family and heads out to catch a bus that will bring him to Penticton by 8:30 am to begin his work day.

He’ll put in a hard day’s work through a challenging practice in various activities throughout the day, hops back on the bus and heads home at 5:00 pm to have dinner with his family, finish up any extra work and gets a chance to unwind before getting up the next day and doing it again.

The difference between Brett and the many, many others that work the 9-to-5 is he’s not going to an office building or sitting in a boardroom.

Brett is going to Penticton High School from 8:30 am until 1:00 pm, and then he goes to the rink.

Brett is a student of the Okanagan Hockey Academy.

He’s a 5-foot-10, 16-year-old forward on the OHA’s U18 Prep team that plays in the Canadian Sport School Hockey League and was a 9th round pick of the Medicine Hat Tigers of the Western Hockey League.

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### Brett is a student-athlete.

His activities after class include getting on the ice for practice, getting in the gym, doing off ice training, watching and learning through video, meeting with his coaches and trying to make himself the best hockey player, student and person he can be.

For nearly 20 years, the Okanagan Hockey Academy has established itself in British Columbia, and now around the world, as a premiere destination for players like Brett who want more – on and off the ice – as they grow as people.



"I would have never got to where I am today without OHA," Brett says adamantly. "They've helped me as a person, also. Some of the coaches, they have taught me lifelong lessons and it's helped build my character, keep me humble and it's really amazing."

"All the coaches are NHL caliber, it makes a huge difference. Practicing every day, going to the gym every day, it's a big step, but that's what you need to get to the next level."

Brett's parents, Deb Sidwell and Alvie Calhoon, have seen the difference as well. "His level of skating and strength and speed all improved on an ongoing basis, especially over Covid where we didn't get to see him for almost a full season," Alvie remarks. "He was doing decent at that time to now, really becoming a different player."

The COVID-19 pandemic affected many players, many different ways. For Brett, he thought he lost a bit of exposure in the upcoming WHL draft because he wasn't playing. But, unlike many others in that draft class, he was on the ice every day.

"We were still practicing, still playing intrasquad games, still training, all of that stuff," Brett recalls. "Looking back, that was super beneficial when other players weren't able to do anything, we were at it every day."

"As his parents we were sitting back watching this kid with these dreams and goals saying 'how do we get him there?'" Brett's mom, Deb wonders. "The fact that OHA was able to keep up with the training and development meant everything because he was ready when he went out to Medicine Hat's camp."

As a 9th round pick, Brett was definitely not a shoo-in to get many looks on an experienced team.

## Instead, he left there with a signed deal.

"When he was drafted, he wasn't signed," Deb mentions. "So, we went out there in August and if it wasn't for OHA getting him prepared and trained over that year, I don't know if he would have been signed because he was a lower pick."

It was a lot of extra work, extra time and extra cost to get Brett to where he is today, but in exchange Deb gets something even more valuable. Something that sets OHA apart from the rest.

"As a family unit, he's home every night," Deb says with a smile. "It's like a normal day now, he's home at 5 o'clock and we get family time and to actually have a life with him."

"We wouldn't change it at all, we got to keep him home and I've got that top notch academy and I get to keep my boy home longer with me."

Pamela Nordin would agree.

The wife and mother of two boys has felt the impact of juggling a hockey schedule, when hockey isn't the primary focus.

"What we found here was the all-inclusive, structured program," Nordin shares. "We are no longer driving our kid around all times of the day and getting him home to worry about homework and then your weekend games where we are going all over the BC Interior. It all kind of fell on the parent."

Tough for any family, even harder with Pamela's husband,

who travels internationally, gone 3-to-5 months at a time.

"It became more and more daunting with Emmett's hockey schedule to the point that I even went down to part time work for a while."

Emmett Nordin and his family knew about OHA and knew some people who had been involved at the school, so he got invited to a shadow day.

"He went to that day, and he came home with the biggest smile on his face," Pamela recalls. "It was a big decision, but it was an easy decision because we had this academy in our backyard. When we learned how they managed the school and the sport, we knew he had every opportunity to succeed."

And just like the Calhouns, the Nordins have reaped the benefits.

"I went back to full time work. I drop him off at their drop off spot and I pick him up for dinner and he's at the kitchen table with all of us," Pamela revels. "In the four years before him going to the academy, we might have sat at the dinner table together maybe twice a week. You can't replace that."

### THE GRASSROOTS

The Okanagan Hockey Group has been running hockey camps in the area for over 50 years.

This community staple originally drew players from across BC & Alberta, but now The Okanagan Hockey Group has operated camps in Canada, United States, Mexico, Japan, Hong Kong, United Arab Emirates, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, England, Scotland and Denmark.

The group took their next step in 2002, launching the Okanagan Hockey Academy out of Penticton, BC.

It was the first hockey academy to be recognized by BC Hockey and Hockey Canada.

They started with one team, but over their time in BC, they grew to six boys teams and two girls.

They have since expanded past the BC border to launch similar academies in St. Pölten, Austria (2008), Swindon, UK (2012), Edmonton, Alberta (2015) and most recently in Whitby, Ontario (2018).

Before the expansion began, the hockey schools would draw current and former NHL players and coaches to help as instructors at the camp.

One of those instructors was Dixon Ward.

The Leduc, Alberta, native and 10-year NHL veteran hadn't yet retired, but was asked by part owners Alan Kerr and Jeff Finlay to come to Kelowna and be a guest at the camp.

"The week ended and I said, 'That was a fun week, thanks a lot,' and Alan said 'Wait, where you going?'" Ward recalls. "He said, 'I need you for the next two weeks, I don't have any more instructors.' So, I got roped into three weeks of hockey camps and went back to Europe that fall and retired after that."

What he thought was a fun week, has turned into much, much more.

"When I came home again, I

got involved in talks with Alan and I joined up on the partnership side of things in a small way with the understanding I would be part of the Kelowna camp side and a little bit of assistant coaching part time with their Penticton hockey school," Ward says. "That lasted about two weeks."

"All of a sudden I was coaching a team and was right in the middle of all of it," Ward laughs. "As it progressed over the next few years, I took on more roles with the organization – sales, marketing, hockey operations, running camps, recruiting and it was a really good introduction into the business as it was going through its biggest growth."

## After Kerr and Finlay left the company, Ward's position continued to expand.

"(Current President) Andy Oakes and I really set our sights on the growth and development on the business side," Ward explains. "That's where we started expanding into Europe and Edmonton and Ontario. The last 7-8 years have been really strong for us."

"Getting involved I didn't know what the business model looked like, I just kind of fell into it and I really enjoyed the camps and getting involved with the kids and helping their development and I was hooked from there," Ward admits. "Now I'm in so deep, there's no getting out."

It was a slow start for the Academy, namely because the traditional minor hockey associations weren't receptive to playing against them.

"They were very standoffish about playing private programs," Ward admits. "What we had to do was come up with our own format and our own competition and the only way to do that was to start the CSSHL – that's when we really saw growth happening across Western Canada."

In 2009, five schools came together to create the Canadian Sport School Hockey League. The CSSHL launched with five sport schools and eight teams over two divisions.

The league now boasts 26 accredited schools and 84 teams over six different divisions.

In the Preliminary Players to Watch List for the 2022 NHL Entry Draft, 29 CSSHL alumni have been selected.

"The consumer at that time started to demand choice and not to be pigeonholed into their local minor hockey associations," Ward states. "We were always front and center saying having a choice for your child is something we have promoted from the start."

As the league got established, the quality of players started to improve dramatically, and the school saw tremendous growth from some of the players who would play at this level and go on to junior hockey or NCAA.

The new wave of players came to the program as elite talent looking for professional coaching; they wanted more on and off ice training and a set schedule.

"The initial recruitment process was really the ability to combine all the key areas to youth development into one program – starting with the educational development in a highly structured environment," Ward shares. "What was attractive to people initially was the combination of academics and athletics to create a consistent daily schedule."

"We can utilize daytime ice and achieve the academic goals we've set out and be done by 5 pm every day so kids can have the proper nutrition, proper rest, proper time to complete homework and spend time with family instead of having practices and games all over the place at any given time."



## THE EDUCATION OF HOCKEY

“Everything I have today, I owe to hockey.”

Mike Needham sits behind a desk during our Zoom interview, in front of a white board with names and strategies arranged around it.

He looks like a teacher.

In fact, in many ways, he is. And that connection is where his OHA story begins.

“I’ve always been involved in the game, I love hockey,” Needham regals. “I missed the competitive side and the teaching side and I did coach a bit while my son was playing in Penticton and I got the itch back and I thought this was a really good opportunity in a real quality environment where you can have a big impact on these players’ lives.”

Needham’s son came to the academy as a 15-year-old and played on the U18 team during his time.

At the time, Needham was transitioning out of his own business and got a chance to see the day-to-day of what his son was involved with, so he picked up the phone and talked to Dixon Ward and Andy Oakes to see if there was an opportunity.

Needham’s hockey background up to that point speaks for itself. As a member of the Kamloops Blazers, he amassed 243 points in 176 games, capping off his junior career with a Gold Medal at the World Junior Hockey Championships in Helsinki, Finland.

There he played with Eric Lindros, Patrice Brisebois, Stephan Fiset and Dave Chyzowski and against the likes of Pavel Bure, Jaromir Jagr, Robert Reichel and Bobby Holik.

Needham was drafted in the 6th round of the 1989 NHL Draft by Pittsburgh and would go on to play 81 games with the Penguins, winning a Stanley Cup with the team in 1992.

“I can’t tell you where it is,” Needham jokes when asked where he keeps his Stanley Cup ring. “I have a safe at home, I don’t wear it a whole lot because they are pretty big but I’m very proud of it. I’ll take it out for special occasions. Every year I’ll bring it in one day and show the kids I’m teaching that year.”

After his pro career, Needham returned to Kamloops as a skills coach and assistant coach, before becoming the full-time head coach of the U15 Prep Bantam team at OHA.

He’s been around some of the best coaches in Canadian hockey history, namely Don Hay and Ken Hitchcock.

He spoke about being a sponge around those two icons of the coaching profession, and how the game has changed from his time as well.

“When I first started coaching I remember playing for guys like Ken and Don,” Needham continues. “It wasn’t about them developing trust, they just told you what to do. You ran through the wall if they told you to. But that’s all changed.”

Needham had the all-important role of being one of the first points of contact for kids as they arrived and began their time at the Okanagan Hockey Academy.

That’s just how he wants it.

“The biggest thing I see with minor hockey kids that first enter our program is the lack of hockey sense and knowledge of the game,” Needham points out. “We have the ability to really change that and start thinking the game, understanding team concepts. They are all normally very skilled, but it’s the understanding of how to play.”

The message when they walk in the door is simple. One you will see referenced throughout this article.

“It’s the same every year. I want to teach them what it means to work and to compete on and off the ice,” Needham says. “What does it mean to work hard and give your best effort 100% of the time, every day? You have a group of like-minded kids with the same goals in mind that want to learn and it’s a great environment – similar to any junior or NCAA environment they get exposed to so much earlier.”

The day-to-day his son experienced is where Needham gets his motivation from. He is a hockey coach, but he’s also a guidance counselor, a mentor, a teacher and a friend.

“Being immersed in it daily, you develop relationships and trust with these kids so quickly because you’re always with them and always helping and working on getting better,” Needham states. “A big part of coaching now is that ongoing relationship beyond the game. I enjoy getting to know if they are golfers in the offseason, or if they like to fish. Building that trust is one of the best parts of this job.”

He’s been behind the bench and watched many players go through the program and on to successful hockey careers.

Scott Walford, a 3rd round pick by the Montreal Canadiens in the 2017 NHL Draft, credits Needham for making him the player he is today.

“He believed in us, he made us play at a fast pace,” Walford remembers. “He played in the NHL so he expected a certain standard of practice that hadn’t been expected of us before and that’s really why we had such great success under his leadership.”

“Mike taught me how to breakout pucks and how to get pucks through from the blueline,” Walford continues. “He ran a tough practice for defensemen but now that I look back, a lot of my game is my first pass and I can extend that back to learning from him – putting pucks up the wall, making a good break out pass and it would always end with a shot from the blue line – so he really helped me a lot with that.”

Walford is currently in a joint honours program for economics and accounting at McGill University.

He rode the bus too, from Kelowna to Penticton, when he enrolled at Okanagan Hockey Academy during his Bantam year.

“The biggest adjustment for me was what was expected day in and day out,” Walford explains. “It’s easy to be good at 2-3 practices a week, but when you are practicing five times a week and working out five times a week, taking the bus in every day, going to school, going to the rink and taking care of everything after that, it really shows you how to be a pro.”

“It was an easy decision – the pedigree they had, the program and the plan they had set up, it was a good place to be.”

With the start of the 2021-22 NHL season, one young player being counted on to continue his development within the Detroit Red Wings organization is Michael Rasmussen.

Teams in a rebuild need to hit on their 1st round picks. Rasmussen went 9th overall to Detroit in 2017.

In his U15 Prep year, Rasmussen put up 87 points and 123 penalty minutes in 59 games.

He was special the day he walked in the door.

“The kids that come in here are very driven, they have an internal drive where you have to ask them to give that effort,” Needham says. “Michael just wanted more. He wanted to be on the ice more, and we are on the ice every day. He was competitive in the classroom, in the gym and on the ice.”



Rasmussen graduated from OHA to the Tri-City Americans, where he scored 157 points in 161 WHL games before beginning his ascent through the Red Wings’ organization.

“With Michael, you just had to steer him in the right direction. I would say, ‘you’re a Western League hockey player, you should go that route, here are things you can work on, but don’t deviate from the path you are on,’” Needham told him. “It’s relatively easy when they are so driven and internally motivated, it’s easy to coach them.”

“Malcolm Cameron, Mike Needham, Dixon Ward – I give them a lot of credit for where I am today,” Rasmussen admits. “They instilled in me the work ethic and drive to get better.”

## PENTICTON HIGH SCHOOL

It’s easy to read this article and see hockey is the primary focus of the Okanagan Hockey Academy.

You’d be wrong.

Throughout my interviews, every “hockey” person I spoke to emphasized one important thing about OHA more than anything else – the education.

These student-athletes are just that. And at OHA, the classroom is king. OHA’s Academic Advisor, Dave Nackoney, is one of the elder statesmen of the Academy program, having been on staff since 2003.

Nackoney by trade is a teacher, a counsellor and, at one time, a hell of a basketball player.

Studying at Brandon University, Nackoney won two Canadian Championships on the court and was also named an All-Canadian.

It wasn’t until he met the Academy’s original owner, Larry Lund, that Nackoney started to turn his focus to the rink.

“At any time in life you get to learn something new, I didn’t play hockey at all, but I was helping Larry’s daughter get into university,” Nackoney recalls. “Working with her created this relationship and he proposed I get involved with OHA. Through the process it’s been really exciting learning a sport like hockey when you come from a basketball background.”

The running joke that seems to be created is that Nackoney has the most power of anyone at OHA.

His say can keep a star player off the ice heading into a big tournament.

He’s also the one who can start a spree of high fives and encouragement from many different departments.

“Coach knows, parents know, study hall teachers know, so if a kid is doing well he’s getting five pats on the back by the end of the day, but if he’s not, he’s probably going to get the opposite.”

“Dave is simply amazing. I am so completely thankful and grateful for him,” Pamela Nordin speaks of her and her son’s time at the school. “He takes ownership over these kids and puts everything in place for them to succeed – there’s no reason they can’t. They have every tool within their reach.”

“We are student athletes and we believe in it – it’s a great relationship we have with

Dave and the school and I have the ability as the coach to take things away from a kid that isn’t doing the work in school and I think that’s important,” Needham remarks. “I’ve left kids back from big tournaments because they were behind in school and it’s hurt our team, but it sent a message to that player that I think was long lasting to them – you do your work, or there is going to be consequences.”

“What we do here and our goal here every day is to create an environment that allows young people to develop in the key areas they want to improve in – hockey, school and character,” Ward points out. “The academic success our kids have is fantastic. The vast majority of kids will improve their academic standings with our program compared to not with the program.”

“By far, our strongest pillar and connectivity and what we do as a program is how it connects to our academic expectations,” agrees OHA General Manager Scott May. “Hopefully, we are a leader in the industry of education-based hockey and we have an impact on their son or daughter’s life that they are leaving here as better people, so they are able to be doctors, lawyers, engineers or hockey players.”

When the Academy got off the ground, the big part for Nackoney and the rest of the staff at Penticton High was to amalgamate the school and the players coming in.

The entire school timetable was changed, so it would work for all the players and teams that were now affiliated.

Nackoney even mentions looking at different types of sports-based academies – like skiing – to find out what worked best for them.

## But Penticton High is not just a hockey school. The success of the hockey program can now be felt in many other corners of the institution.

“The swim academy took the same path and now we’ve won four straight provincial titles, we have five national team swimmers because they have

proper times to do their studies, time for their craft and time to rest,” Nackoney tells us. “You develop one culture and you get people who are used to excellence and it gets contagious.”

“The best thing that works for us is that we are one big team. There is a real professional attitude amongst their staff,” Nackoney says. “I couldn’t have more respect for the people over there, and the same for the teachers who work at the school.”

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Having the best coaches, the best teachers and the best education platform is one thing.

It feeds the mind, the skillset and the drive.

Heather Perrin takes care of the rest.

The OHA’s Manager of Athletic Therapy & Medical Services has worked in a number of sports, including rugby, judo and lacrosse.

But for her, the best chance to land a full time job doing what she loves was in hockey.

“There’s not that many full time jobs in hockey, especially for females,” Perrin admits. “When I returned to BC, coming in and working in an environment with multiple coaches and multiple teams with multiple age groups forces you to be a dynamic person and I loved the idea of that.”

Perrin joined the school in 2014 and her job, day in and day out, is to make sure the boys and girls at this academy understand how to use their bodies to their advantage – and how to care for them properly.

Perrin has been to the top of the mountain.

In 2018, she had the opportunity to take a year sabbatical from OHA to work with the Canadian National Women’s Hockey Team, serving as the team’s therapist for the Olympic Team that captured silver in South Korea.

“It’s a once in a lifetime thing. I’ve never worked so hard in my life and never felt so proud and humbled to represent Canada,” Perrin beams. “It was something I have worked my whole life for and was a pretty incredible moment.”

I asked Perrin if it’s a challenge getting kids into the gym, training their bodies, and beginning those routines, somewhat expecting the answer to be yes.

Perrin just chuckled.

“At the start, it’s more about toning that down and channeling the excitement,” Perrin comments. “When they walk into the weight room, they just want to bicep curl and bench press. It’s hard because we don’t actually let them do that too often at the start because we have to educate on proper weight selection and how important the movement is instead of who can lift the most.”

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## It’s also just as much about understanding their bodies.

“First year kids in the academy don’t know that feeling of their whole body hurting. There’s a lot of education around hurt versus harmed,” Perrin continues. “Yes, you’re hurting today and that’s ok. This pain is ok. Yes, your rib cage is bruised, your back is bruised, all of that does not mean you are injured and can’t play – this is your new normal.”

Another tool she regularly gets to use to her advantage is one she preaches often in our conversation: using other sports to develop skills that can be a benefit in other ways.

“I think the fact that in the offseason, when hockey is done, we play soccer, we play ultimate frisbee, and that makes a big difference early on,” Perrin says.

“You learn how to move to space, you learn how to cut, how to lose your opponent and early on they don’t realize how much that translates to hockey.”

### HOCKEY IS THE VEHICLE

As the program has grown and evolved, another key piece was brought into the mix very recently.

Scott May was running a similar program at the Delta Hockey Academy as the Director of Hockey Operations since 2013.

There he helped Ian Gallagher, father of Montreal Canadiens’ forward Brendan Gallagher, grow that Academy from two teams to eight.

He also coached the Midget Prep team and was the Head Coach of the Female Prep team in the 2018-19 season.

Prior to his coaching career, May spent four years at Ohio State University, before being drafted by the Toronto Maple Leafs in the 7th round of the 2002 NHL draft.

He played eight seasons of professional hockey in the AHL, ECHL, Germany and Italy.

In 2019, May was looking for a new challenge. He saw the OHA and the people around it as an opportunity.

“Getting the chance to learn from Dixon Ward and Andy Oakes, for me, to have mentors like that to learn the business side of it was driving and motivating,” May admits. “I was able to move off the bench as a coach to more of a business manager and GM, which was a challenge I was really looking for.”

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## Instead of running a bench of players, May now has a staff of 16-20, constantly looking to make the hockey program bigger and better.

But that’s not just in wins and losses.

“At the end of day, hopefully we see success on the scoreboard, but this is truly about the growth of the young men and women that run through our program,” May says. “Hockey is the vehicle that gets them there, once every blue moon we’ll have an NHL prospect come through, but what I think we do really well is the humanistic part, the community service part, the academic part.”

May says there isn’t necessarily a blueprint for what kind of kid will have success at OHA, but there are definitely characteristics the school looks for when drawing up their next recruiting class.

“They have to have a minimum ability but see potential – does the kid eat, sleep and breathe hockey,” May starts. “You have to have passionate kids who want to be here. Character is a huge component of what we do. Trust, honesty, and hard work; that has to be the pillars we have to stand on. It’s a huge time investment, it’s a huge financial investment so we must make sure we have the right people in here that are going to have success in the long term.”

“We have to be the Cadillac of programs as far as what we provide,” May contests. “I think we check all the boxes when it comes to the academic expectations for what we do here and spend a lot of time, effort and resources to make sure that is a staple we believe in.”

When May joined the program, the recruiting class was already set, but as he explains, success is always lagged in this process.

“I tried to look at this as a three year transitional plan,” May says. “Year One – as-

sess and evaluate, Year Two – implement change, and year Three – reassess and evaluate the changes you’ve made and build off platform for longer term vision.”

As for the on-ice product, with so many age groups and so many teams, thus so many coaches under one umbrella, collaboration is the key.

“There is flexibility on each team and that’s the fun of coaching. The fundamental basis of what you’re coaching is the same across the board,” May instructs. “There is a progression plan and building blocks of starting with the basics with our U15 team all the way to our U18 teams. It’s a constant teaching and repetition of the structure and the habit and the routine of the skillset and the information we are giving them.”

“We like to think we have a template that each coach will follow – if you come and watch an OHA team play, you’ll get a consistent feel from our U15 team all the way to our U18 team,” Needham concurs.

“The more you do that people start talking the same language and I think that’s an important part for us as staff that the message is clear, direct and we are using the same language,” May continues. “If the kids don’t get it, it is not their fault, that is 100% on the coach. That’s the business of making them better and that shows our coaches they have to explain it differently, we have to change our scripting.”

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## “We are solution-based programming where we have to find answers to our problems, not just identify problems.”

Ward sets out every year with a list of objectives he wants accomplished by his coaches and it’s something they document weekly.

“We want to move better, play faster, handle the puck better, score more, work harder, be better people and understand the game better,” Ward explains. “If one coach in Ontario has a great model for teaching one part of the game, we can share that with the other coaches and they say ‘yeah, I’m going to try that too.’”

“Standardizing our philosophical approach to how we want to play, without taking away the individualism of each coach’s ability to run a different team play system as they go, is a big part of what we are doing.”

### SOMETIMES IT’S WHAT YOU DON’T SAY

In our first conversation, Ward makes a profound statement.

“Sometimes it’s more important what we don’t say than what we do say.”

What does that mean, exactly?

“We are not here to create NHL hockey players, we are trying to give kids the opportunity to develop and to give themselves a chance to move to the next level of development,” Ward says. “We are not going to jeopardize our integrity because we need your kid to score three goals in a bantam hockey game, that is not something that is



important to us.”

“I want to make sure that people see they are cared about, there is a vested interest in every student here, every son and daughter, and I hold that very close to what my deliverables are,” May recites. “100% it’s about the people. We are teachers at heart and we absolutely love what we are doing. There is such a passion and a drive for it. End of the day it’s sharing that environment with those kids in a fun, structured, healthy and long lasting success in life.”

“Understanding how the real world is going to treat you,” Needham notes, is one of the most important lessons he tries to teach. “I’m a very straight forward coach. I don’t sugar coat. I’m honest and I think to a man they appreciated that and they’ll come back now and say ‘now I get it.’ In the real world, if you don’t do your job, you don’t keep it and if you don’t do it well, you’re going to hear about it.”

The values of the program are something Ward reiterates throughout our talk.

“They are all important things, but they only work if you work hard, you’re honest, you’re respectful and you understand you are going to fail most days and you’re ok with failure, because that failure will help you succeed,” Ward cautions. “How you act when you succeed is just as important as how you act if you fail.”

### THE OHA EXPERIENCE

Every hockey player, coach or parent that’s rode the bus, knows the bus.

It’s where lifelong friendships are made and victories are celebrated. It’s the happiest place in the world after a win, and the darkest, quietest corner when you don’t.

For guys like Brett Calhoon, Scott Walford and Michael Rasmussen – the bus was just the beginning.

“The friendships, first of all, some of the people I’ve played with are going to be my brothers for life. Even the coaches, I text some of the coaches on a daily basis and it’s just a big family,” Calhoon boasts.

“Everyone makes going to the rink, going to school just a good experience,” Rasmussen reflects after he steps off the Little Caesars Arena ice surface from practice. “To this day, the people are some of my best friends and people I’m always in contact with so above anything else it’s the people who run that place.”

“A lot of my memories are stuff on the ice like winning championships,

but a lot of them go back to the time with my billet family and the time with our players on the bus,” Walford shares. “We had a really special group of guys and I hope we can do a reunion some time because life gets busy but when you see them 5-10 years later, the connections never left. It’s the kind of brotherhood you don’t get much in life.”

As the next group of OHA students have begun flooding their campuses around the world, hockey may be the vehicle, but it’s people like Dixon Ward, Scott May, Mike Needham, Dave Nackoney and Heather Perrin that are behind the wheel.

“I can only promise you one thing,” Ward states. “We are going to create an environment for each kid that is going to give them the best opportunity to succeed.”