

Practice pays off for OT improv team

■ By Joanna Phillips
SPECIAL TO THE BEAVER

The secret to the success of Oakville Trafalgar High School's (OTHS) award-winning improve team is practice.

It's a real paradox. The secret to winging it on stage without a script is actually hours and hours of preparation beforehand. Earlier last month, the O.T. team returned with a bronze medal from the Canadian Improv Games in Ottawa. The team advanced to the nationals when it captured gold in the Halton zone and gold again in Ontario.

But while the students had to perform spontaneous, improvised scenes to win, the students have been practicing twice a week, sometimes at 7 a.m., since October. Teamwork also helps. These players draw inspiration from each other.

The team consists of nine students, and they are as much of a family as two brothers, Benjamin and Caleb Gilgan, who participate.

Led by Melisa Muzzatti, a photography and drama teacher, who has been coaching since 2003, the team is endowed with a strong set of values and appreciation for one another.

The very nature of competitive improv breeds a friendly kind of banter amongst teams, even on the national level.

On its website, Canadian Improv Games (CIG), a non-profit organization, states that it is "a loving competition between teams of



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BANNER YEAR: The Oakville Trafalgar High School improv team with its third place bronze banner from the national high school improv competition. Pictured here are: back row from the left: Lindsey King, Jen Collins, Korey McDermott, Melisa Muzzatti, coach, Benjamin Gilgan, Sarah Leaper, Kate Millet, Christian Glas. Front from the left: Julian Gomez, Connor Low and Caleb Gilgan.

high school students trained to perform spontaneous, improvised scenes within the framework of the CIG's own five event competitive format."

The competition consists of four events, each four minutes in length, chosen from

five possible categories: style, theme, life, character and story.

At the nationals, the team chose to improvise a made-up word in the character category. The referees, on consultation with the audience, decided on "awoola," which

may sound like toddler gibberish, rather than, denote, say, sheep. However, to an improv team it makes perfect sense, as they went on to demonstrate to the crowd in Ottawa.

Cory McDermott, a member of the team, was a farmer. The rest were either taming sheep, or were the sheep.

It's known as an instinctive thing. "Once you open the floodgates, there's no stopping," said Caleb Gilgan. Gilgan and McDermott are so passionate about improv, they've returned to Oakville-Trafalgar as "super seniors," spending an extra year there, having already graduated.

"It wouldn't be high school without improv," said Julian Gomez. He got his start when two of his friend literally dragged him to tryouts. He made the team, they didn't.

It's the kind of activity that enables you to take risks and flesh yourself out, says Gilgan.

The motivation behind advancing into subsequent rounds, and bigger competitions, isn't bragging rights, but rather, "getting to do it again," he says.

"You have to trust everyone behind you. You can't get that in a couple weeks of rehearsals," said Coach Muzzatti.

Muzzatti says the team is always letting her push them, and constantly willing to be positive.

The students say that Howard Jerome, who co-created the Canadian Improv Games, swears by the notion that "no matter what job you do, being an improviser helps you."

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