

SPORTS AND LEISURE

Peewee AE Raiders sweep past Milton

Page 2



THE INDEPENDENT & FREE PRESS

Halton Hills' Community Newspaper

Community Calendar

Pages 3, 5, 6



Special pullout section

Wednesday, April 23, 2008

8 Pages

Circulation 21,220

Coach makes a difference to autistic player

EAMONN MAHER
Staff Writer

Although local resident Doug Gillespie wasn't one of the 13 recent recipients of the Canada-wide RBC Local Hockey Leader Award last month for his volunteer efforts, he's still a winner in the eyes of one 10-year-old house leaguer.

When Grade 5 St. Catherine of Alexandria student Adam Thompson told his mom Tracy two years ago that he wanted to play ice hockey, she and husband Dave were somewhat apprehensive, but willing to give it a try.

Adam is autistic, and typically youths with that learning disorder don't adapt well to change or being in a team sports environment.

Yet thanks to Gillespie's efforts, Adam recently finished his second year in the Georgetown Minor Hockey Association's atom house league and is already looking forward to lacing up the blades again in October. He progressed from basically walking on his skates in the initial practice to becoming a versatile player by the end of the first season, which ended with him also lining up in goal for his team's gold medal victory in the GMHA's Weekend of Champions.

"(It's about) working on people's abilities and making them even better," is Adam's motto.

Adam has Autism Spectrum Disorder, but primarily Aspergers Syndrome—much like Dustin Hoffman's character in the 1988 Academy Award-winning movie *Rain Man*—affecting one in 150 children worldwide.

"We were fortunate to have such a great coach in Doug for the first year because Adam wouldn't have played again this year. The coaching is what made the difference for Adam," said Tracy, a nurse for RBC travel insurance.

For Gillespie, who has three children of his own and a cousin with a similar type of autism as Adam's, the approach he took was to help Adam be part of the team on and off the ice without appearing to treat him any differently than the other players. His coaching philosophy is that the kids can and should play all positions, something that at first didn't go over well with Adam, a centreman by preference.

So after one game, Gillespie asked Adam



Georgetown Minor Hockey Association house league coach Doug Gillespie was nominated for the RBC Local Hockey Leader Award this past year because of his successful efforts to help guide 10-year-old Adam Thompson through his first season of organized hockey.

Photo by Eamonn Maher

if he might want to try playing left wing next time out, explained what the new position involved, and checked back by telephone a day before the next game to see if that was still agreeable to the new position.

"This was key for Adam because it allowed him to make choices and know what was expected of him," added Tracy.

"Sometimes with the autism he loses his focus but his teammates would come over

and tell him, 'The puck's there!' and he just goes after it. It's been a very successful exercise for him."

'...for Adam it was just about having fun and enjoying the experience, which was really refreshing.'

— Coach Doug Gillespie

Gillespie also had nicknames for each of the team members and every couple of weeks would host a Sunday morning street hockey game. Adam 'The Atom Bomb' continues to receive occasional phone calls from 'Coach Doug,' even though Gillespie oversaw a team in a different division this past

season. He credits Adam with working hard during his GMHA initiation program sessions for the vast improvement in his skating.

"We did have a bunch of competitive kids on the team and for Adam it was just about having fun and enjoying the experience, which was really refreshing," Gillespie noted.

"The biggest thing for me to see from Adam was him touching the puck as many times as he did towards the end of the season and he became extremely proficient at winning faceoffs," he said.

"Also, it was important to match him up with one or two other players so he played most of the time together and they were familiar with each other on the same line, whether it was forward or defence."

Gillespie added that he can understand why parents of autistic children would be reluctant to sign their kids up for team-based recreational activities, but hopes that attitudes can change. On the GMHA's registration form, a medical condition section must be filled out, although there is nothing requiring the listing of learning disabilities.

"Yes, the parents are terrified, but it doesn't need to be like that," he said. "It's so important to make the coach aware of the situation and be up front about it. The whole team doesn't need to know, because the kids are smart enough, they'll figure it out and be supportive. All the kids on the team should definitely be treated equally in the changeroom, and then you can work a little behind the scenes. There may be just a little different learning strategy, so that's why it's crucial that the coach is empowered with the knowledge and then develop a strategy together to work with the condition the child has. It's just a little extra work, not much."

When asked what he liked most about playing for Coach Doug, Adam didn't hesitate.

"A ton of things," he said, smiling. "Road hockey on Sundays. Winning the gold medal. We had a lot of fun."

Even better, since Gillespie, who oversees goalie clinics for the GMHA as well, will also serve as convener for the same peewee division his son D.J. plays in, it's pretty much assured that Adam is a Stamkos-sure lock to be reunited with his former coach next fall, with dad Dave serving as the assistant.

PARK MOTOR SALES - "Price Busters"

2008 FLAGSTAFF CAMPERS
Awning, Refrigerator, Cooktop, Furnace, BBQ, Radial Tires.
Available 8-10-12 ft. models
Financing O.A.C.
From **\$5,495.00**

2005 DODGE CARAVAN SE
3.3L V6, Auto, Power Windows, Locks & Mirrors, TV/DVD, Cruise & Tilt.
"Factory Warranty" 82,291 kms.
\$9,995.00
Stk.# C354

2003 PONTIAC GRAND PRIX GT - 4 Door
3.8LL V6, Auto, Power Leather Seats, Power Sunroof, Cruise & Tilt.
"Warranty" 72,300 kms.
\$9,995.00
Stk.#C351

Hwy. 7 between Georgetown & Acton
www.trader.ca/parkmotorsales 905-877-2261