

Hockey's silent minority

Despite the growing acceptance of Deaf players, still very few in competitive ranks

Planning on attending a North Halton Twisters BB peewees game this spring?

If so, you may want to commit these simple hand gestures to memory.

First, pass two open palms over each other — the sign for 'nice.' Then, put the index and middle fingers together from your right hand and place them between the thumb and index finger of your left (stretched open like a gun) — which indicates a 'goal.'

Brittany Mallach's teammates have become awfully familiar with that non-verbal praise, having flashed it well over 100 times in the past two years. Still, the 12-year-old Miltonian — the natural scorer of her Deaf hockey family — sometimes wishes she could hear the cheers she frequently creates.

"Yeah, I guess so," the young centre said with a smile. "It's all right though. I can see the cheering even if I can't hear it."

While acceptance and support of Deaf athletes in mainstream competitive sports like hockey has come a long way over the years, the numbers don't always reflect that.

Brittany's one of just two Deaf players in the Twisters organization right now (the other being from Georgetown), while 14-year-old brother Brandon is the lone player in Milton Minor Hockey's rep system — toiling with the AA bantams.

And this in a community with a prominent Deaf school and a sizable Deaf population.



with STEVE LeBLANC

In the stands

Asked what it's like to be a Deaf player competing on a hearing team gives both Mallach youths reason to pause — which can no doubt be looked upon in a positive light. After all, the fact that they don't often give this much thought suggests they've encountered more bridges than barriers.

"My teammates have learned some signs and communication with my coach is not a problem," said Brandon, who as a centre/left winger was third in team scoring this season. "Mostly he (coach) gestures with me and when he needs to say more, when I'm taking too many penalties or something, he'll write it down for me."

"I don't feel it is a challenge to be Deaf and play hockey," added Brittany, who last year captained the Twisters' B atoms, finishing with a whopping 94 goals, and is now a regular scorer with this season's peewees. "I have been involved with team sports since I was four and have learned to manage whatever frustrations I have early on. My teammates and coaches have been very supportive."

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GRAHAM PAINE / CANADIAN CHAMPION

ALL IN THE FAMILY: Tim Mallach has kept busy in recent years as an assistant coach with his children's — Brittany and Brandon — hockey teams.

Smith helps Gold Ice finish 4th at worlds

The Gold Ice juniors have certainly picked the best-possible times to deliver their personal-best performances this season.

Aided by 15-year-old Miltonian Victoria Smith, the Brampton-based synchronized skating team set new club benchmarks in both its short and free (long) programs last week in Neuchatel, Switzerland — with scores of 67.11 and 107.07 respectively.

These combined to give them a fourth-place finish out of 20 teams on the world championship stage, where they fell less than two-and-a-half points shy of claiming a medal.

Taking gold and bronze were Finland's Fintastic and Musketeers, while fellow Canadian powerhouse Nexxice — a Burlington-Kitchener club who beat out

Gold Ice for gold at the recent nationals in Oshawa — came away with silver.

Quite consistent during the two-day meet, Smith and company placed fourth in both programs.

"I had a great time at the worlds; it was an awesome experience," said Smith in an e-mail from Rome, where she's spending March Break with a friend on the team. "It was a little disappointing coming so close to a medal, but fourth is still an amazing accomplishment. And to have two Canadian teams finish in the top five was something to be proud of."

This marked the second overseas competition this year for the local skater, who helped Gold Ice engineer a silver-medal performance at the Prague Cup.



Victoria Smith

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