

Attitude toward Deaf players much different today: Mallach

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Those comments represent a stark contrast to what father Tim experienced growing up in Scarborough.

His 1970s playing days were riddled with obstacles, as Deaf players weren't exactly embraced with open arms.

"Attitude was the biggest barrier I had when I was younger. Back then integration was not a common concept, and it took a lot of effort to help others open their minds up to a Deaf player," he recalled. "Both my parents are Deaf and were strong supporters of anything I wanted to be a part of, but otherwise there was no help for me back then. I had to persevere on my own and break down the barriers for myself."

Echoing those comments is another local hockey dad — Norm Brownell, whose son Matthew played AA rep for a few years in the late '80s and early '90s before a successful run with the provincial and national Deaf programs.

"Deaf players were pretty isolated back

then. Even with Matthew and another Deaf player, Chad Broussard, being on the same team most years, it was still pretty hard," said Brownell, a longtime supporter of both Deaf programs.

Intent on making integration smoother for his kids, Tim has spent the past few years serving as an assistant coach, first with Brandon's teams and now with Brittany's Twisters.

Lots of support

He's quick to point out, though, that he hasn't been the only communication link, especially since moving to Milton — where he sees Deaf athlete acceptance as significantly higher than in their native London — a couple of years ago to avoid the lengthy commute to E.C. Drury School for the Deaf.

"The Twisters go out of their way to ensure that funding is in place to provide interpreters for Brittany's training and team events. Brandon is comfortable with his team and coach so he hasn't requested an inter-

preter for training and games, but we will be putting in a request for one for the banquet and we expect a positive response."

Of course this isn't to suggest being Deaf doesn't have its challenges in the world of sports — especially one as fast as hockey.

Brandon has never had a problem keeping up with the game's pace, although his speed can serve as a detriment as much as an asset.

Explained Winterhawks head coach Alan Langle, "Picture it like this. Brandon is skating hard up the left wing. His linemate is 10 feet to his right and four feet behind him. Two forwards and one defenceman are moving toward Brandon as he has the puck. If he could hear his teammates calling him he would know and be able to fake left and make a drop pass to his right for a better scoring chance."

"What happens now is Brandon's in an isolated world. All his visual focus is ahead of him and he has about a half-a-second to decide what to do, so he tries to skate through everyone."

Absolute focus crucial

Brandon works hard to keep such scenarios to a minimum, stressing that Deaf players need to stay completely focused to be aware what's going on around them at all times — in order to avoid everything from off-sides to continuing to skate after the whistle blows.

Those who've played with Brandon for a while will tell you that while Deaf, his game doesn't exactly have the volume turned down. Resembling a young Bobby Clarke and often just as aggressive and fearless as

the former Flyers captain, Brandon combines a strong two-way game with an in-your-face style that some may not expect from a Deaf player.

Said Tim, "He stands up for himself, all right. Both he and Brittany want to prove themselves and I've always encouraged that."

Given the growing trend of trash talk in hockey, being Deaf may have one advantage.

"I can't hear the other team razz me," said Brandon, who like his sister plays sports year round — with soccer and three-on-three hockey keeping him busy through the spring and summer. "I can focus 100 per cent of my attention on my play and not what the other team is saying to me."

An intricate part of a powerhouse Twisters take that's now well into the playoffs, Brittany has aspirations of making the jump to AA hockey in the next year or two — something that seems within reach.

"Brittany's a very hard working girl. I'm truly amazed at how she reacts on the ice on off-sides and all the whistles," said coach Paul Cook. "She's adapted really well."

For all the headway in making competitive sports more accessible to Deaf people, Tim says there's still plenty of kids who aren't enjoying organized athletics like their hearing counterparts.

"Often I see hearing parents who seem to have reservations about putting their Deaf child into sports. I feel that if a child wishes to try out for a sport, whether it's recreational or competitive, they should be encouraged to do so, regardless of their hearing status."

Williams backstops Otters to division title

Ryan Williams didn't feel like waiting to hoist the Phillip Conference trophy.

Falling behind 3-0 in the opening frame Saturday, it looked as though the Huntsville Otters would need at least one more game to close out the Orangeville Crushers.

Their 19-year-old goalie had other ideas.

In the latest chapter of a rock-solid playoff run, Williams stoned Orangeville through the last two periods of game five, giving his

teammates — who include fellow Miltonian Dane Horvat — the opportunity to stage a huge comeback and prevail 5-3.

Williams now sports a 92.7 save per centage and 11-3 record in post-season play.

Also 19, Horvat has seven goals and two assists in the playoffs.

Huntsville will take on Ruddock Conference champion Kingston in the league semifinals.

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