

Little NHL important to developing Native players

By Jim Windle

MISSISSAUGA - For the 44th time, young Onkwehonwe hockey prodigies are packing up their equipment and dreams to participate in the biggest all-Native minor hockey tournament there is, at the Hershey Centre in Mississauga.

The Little Native Hockey League has produced a number of pro and semi-pro players over the years, many of whom attribute the encouragement, the fun and the friendships gained by participating in the tournament as important to their development as players and as people.

Cody McCormick, who did stints in Colorado, Buffalo and Minnesota of the NHL along with several years in the AHL and minor pros, cut his teeth at the li'l NHL.

Chris Simon, who played several years in the NHL with stops in Quebec, Washington, Chicago, Colorado, New York Rangers, Minnesota, Calgary Flames, and New York Islanders before completing his pro career in Europe, can also point to his roots at the li'l NHL.

Moose Factory's Jonathan Cheechoo who played in San Jose and Ottawa and is currently playing pro in Europe with the Minsk Dynamo has fond memories of the li'l NHL as well.

The Minor-pros are also full of Native players with li'l NHL experi-

ence as kids honing their craft, including Ohsweken's Cameron Sault who is now playing for the Brantford Blast's of the Allan Cup Hockey Sr. league, after spending years in the semi-pros in the USA.

"I think it was as an Atom when I first went to the lil NHL," Sault recalls. "I played for Oneida for three years."

The experience was something he recalls with great pleasure, but believes it also helped to develop his confidence both as a player and as a young Onkwehonwe man.

"I couldn't wait to go every year," he said. "It was a fun week of competitive hockey and it was a real confidence builder."

He points out that it's not just the players who benefit from participation in the tournament.

"Coaches and organizers and volunteers benefit as well," he says. "It's good to celebrate your heritage and to represent your community."

Sault still has friends and acquaintances he has met at the li'l NHL and sometimes runs into teammates and opponents from those days.

Who knows which of the players on the ice this week in Mississauga will go on to a hockey career, but even if they don't, the experience and the celebration of who they are will stay with them the rest of their lives. That is how important this tournament is.



Brantford Blast star Cam Sault attributes his experience playing at the Little NHL as instrumental in his growth as a player and as a young Onkwehonwe lad meeting other Native kids in an atmosphere that celebrates their heritage and culture.