

SPORTS: Pre-season schedule opens tonight in Stouffville

Spirit Jr. A players arrive in shape

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One day does not constitute an entire season.

But what second-year Stouffville Spirit head coach Craig Donovan observed of his players when they reported for the first official day of training camp Sunday, he was thoroughly impressed with.

With close to 40 hopefuls in attendance, the Spirit underwent fitness testing and dryland training at strength and conditioning coach Randy Smith's BodySmith facility in Gormley. Later that same day, they skated and played an intrasquad game at the Clippers Complex.

Catching Donovan's attention was the off-season commitment.

"I thought things went pretty well Sunday. I was definitely pleased with most of the guys. It's evident a lot of them worked their tails off during the summer to get in shape. I was pleased with their conditioning.

"They're way ahead of what I saw a year ago. That's a positive," he said.

Donovan was quick to note it also helped that of the players in camp, a good number are core players who were with the club a year ago. That, he said, was far different from his first training camp a year ago in which there were plenty of

new faces after the club came off a subpar season.

Among those back in the fold were defencemen Brennan Serville, Daniel Fitzgerald and Christian Finch and forwards Matt Neal, Declan Gunovski, Andrew Doyle, Chris Porter and Tyler Ferry. There were more.

"It definitely helps that we have some returning players this year and that's for the better," he said. "We're happy that a lot of the guys who were first- or second-year guys last year are back and are growing together."

While training camp is in its infant stages, Donovan feels the strength of this year's team lies in their defence and up front.

In adding a year of experience to those who are returning along the blueline and forward lines, Donovan remains cautiously optimistic.

Where the biggest concern could be is in goal. Especially since the Spirit lost the services of Kori Coelho, who was the Central Canadian Hockey League's most valuable player last year.

"It'll definitely be tough to replace Kori," conceded Donovan.

The Spirit has three netminders in camp.

With training camp continuing during the week, the Spirit will make their pre-season schedule

debut tonight when they host the Markham Waxers at the Stouffville Arena at 7:30 p.m. The clubs meet again at Markham Centennial Arena Saturday at 7:30 p.m.

After those two pre-season contests, Donovan intends to trim his roster down to 25 or 26 players.

"After that we'll try to make a final decision on our roster," he said.



STAFF PHOTOS/NICK IWANYSHYN

Spirit hopefuls Kurtis Gabriel (left) and Robbie Acton chat while spinning during fitness testing for the Jr. A hockey team at BodySmith in Gormley Sunday.

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Team trainer Randy Smith of BodySmith looks on as Luke Anderson holds the feet of Joseph Chemello during opening day of Spirit training camp.