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MINOR HOCKEY

Clippers taking their lumps with move to AA

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HOCKEY

Stouffville Clippers juveniles

Oct. 14: Stouffville 4 (Devon Smith 2, Brett Twizell, Lee Averill) vs. Orono 3.
Oct. 16: Stouffville 3 (Lloyd Davis, Cameron Genge, Brad Sutherland) vs. East Gwillimbury 1. Oct. 23: Ajax 4 vs. Stouffville 1 (Lloyd Davis). Oct. 26: Stouffville 4 (Lee Zoffraneri 2, Lee Averill, Lloyd Davis, Shutout Sean Mofatt) vs. Whitby 0. Oct. 28: Stouffville 4 (Mitchell Hald, Devon Smith, Scott Miller, Lee Averill, Shutout Chris Pennanen) vs. East Gwillimbury 0. Clippers now 4-1 on season.

When the Stouffville Clippers rep teams made their Ontario Minor Hockey Association debut in the AA circuit this season, there were fears.

While the current campaign is in its infant stages, several Clippers entries have been forced to make an adjustment in moving up in the competitive ranks.

Sure, it hurts to lose, far more than what they might have been accustomed to when they played as an OMHA A entry, some Clippers coaches who were in that boat acknowledged.

But in the long run, they remain optimistic the move will pay off to where they can compete for OMHA AA titles.

"The Whitchurch-Stouffville Minor Hockey Association board certainly expected our teams would struggle a little during their first year at the AA level," said Don Easter, association president and Clippers major midget head coach. "Maybe the best analogy would be to compare us with an expansion team.

"Like all expansion teams, our AA Clipper teams will go through a couple of learning curves. We will first have to learn how to compete at the AA level. We will then have to learn how to win consistently at this level."

Although his club was still seeking its first win after coming out on the short end in its first nine regular-season outings, Clippers minor bantam head coach Joe Lombardo thinks his team has been fairly competitive.

"A couple of bounces our way could have meant the difference," he said of some of those close setbacks. "The biggest difference has been if we don't capitalize on our chances, the opposi-

tion does."

Citing some Clippers' rep teams are already well ahead of the learning curve, Easter hopes their association can pattern itself after the Tottenham New Tecumseth minor hockey organization, which also made the transition to AA from A some five to six years ago.

Easter was quick to point out by their fourth year at the AA level, the TNT organization was producing OMHA championship teams.

Lombardo thinks the biggest adjustment has been the pace of the game.

"We're not playing against older boys or players who are physically bigger. But things happen faster, the players know when to move faster and anticipate plays far more quickly," he said.

Easter was quick to concur.

"Our players are learning they simply don't have the same amount of time and space that they had in A competition. It's not simply that they have to skate faster; they also must also move the puck faster as well as think and react more quickly. This is a big part of the learning curve and these capabilities can only be developed by competing against better quality players," Easter said.

Lombardo also felt players competing with

established AA entries appear to possess a little extra incentive since they feel they're on the cusp of making it to the AAA level, the highest out there.

In coaching a team with players in their mid teens, Lombardo fears in some instances players might get frustrated in losing far more games than what they were accustomed to when they were playing at the A level.

As a result, those players could lose their enthusiasm for the game and end their careers.

On the other hand though and remaining optimistic, Lombardo hopes it will fuel players to become more committed to improving their games during the extra ice time they receive for practices and if they have the desire to do things on their own when time permits.

"It's a real fine line because you don't know how many times a player can lose and say they don't want to play any more," he said. "But some kids will have the drive to get better and to be competitive."

"If you can get everyone to buy into doing the extra work, they will succeed."

Lombardo anticipates it might take two to three years for Clippers' rep teams to be as competitive as existing AA entries.

"Right now we're trying our best and it can only get better. You have to take baby steps first."

Easter insists the standard in the short term is not based simply on the number of wins.

"As an organization we are attempting to support all our coaches and players with specialized training programs focused on skating technique, hockey skills and goaltender development.

"We're not anticipating overnight results, but we believe we're establishing a foundation for long-term success," he said.

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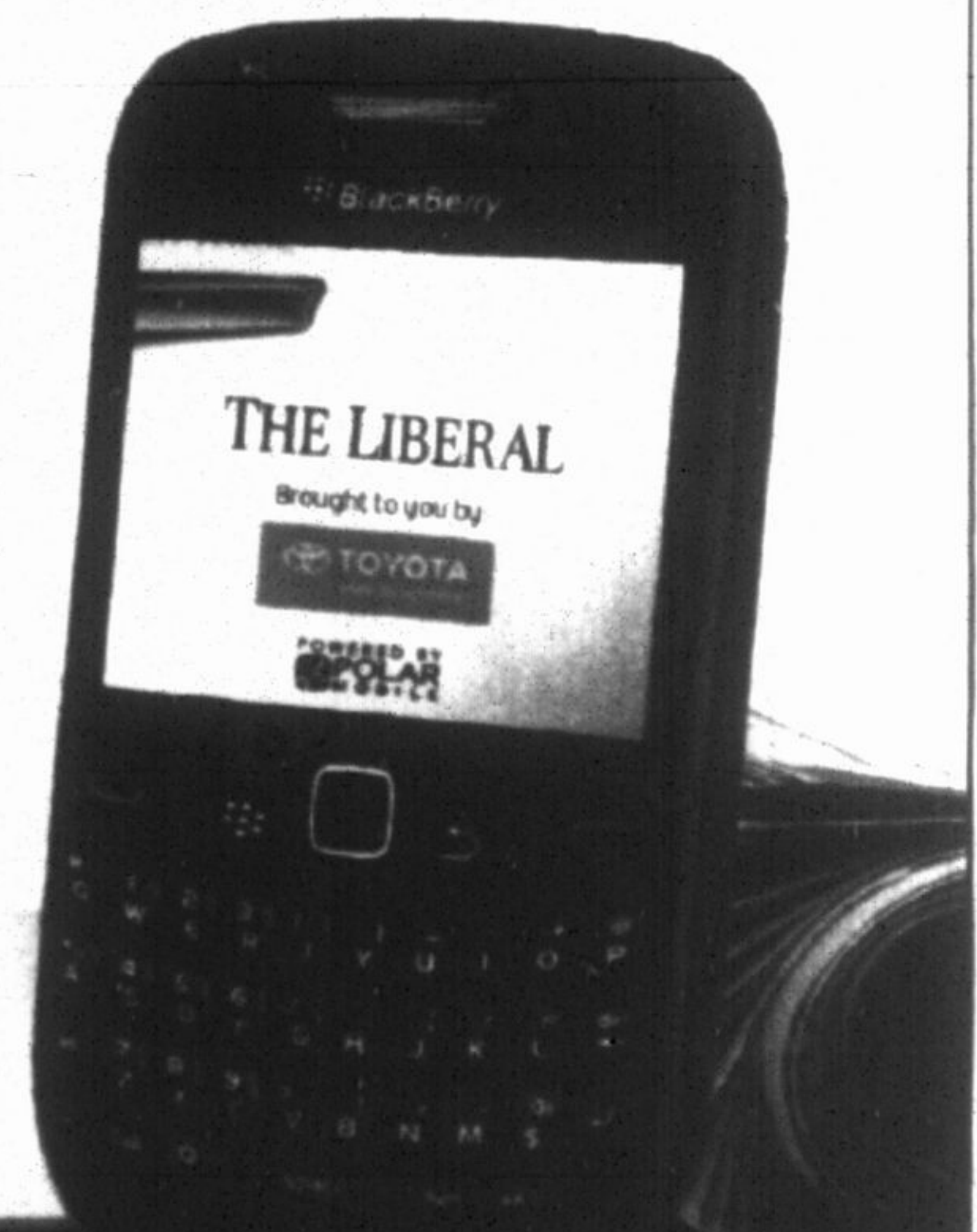
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