

Community Key To High Spirit Level

By Bruce Stapley

After 12 years spent establishing itself as a major force in the Provincial Junior A Hockey League, the Stouffville Spirit is out to become a full fledged member of the Stouffville family.

At the same time, the organization is serving notice it is only interested in players whose hockey goals go beyond those they might score in their time with the club.

The Spirit made it clear they were changing their philosophical direction when owners Zeev Werek and David Laren sacked second year head coach Dan West and long time general manager Ken Burrows earlier this spring. They appointed the town's former mayor Sue Sherban director of promotions and marketing, a newly minted position, after naming Stouffville resident Matt Gibson the club's new GM and David D'Ammizio head coach.

"We want to have far more local integration and partnerships with the community, and with large and small business," said Mrs. Sherban. "The Spirit have always been given a very positive reception here in Stouffville, but it's all about outreach. It's up to the team to promote itself."

Mr. D'Ammizio said it's a matter of tapping into an existing resource. "We want to take advantage of the great community spirit for hockey in Stouffville. My hope is that by getting involved like we plan to do that we will have a great environment, a family atmosphere."

Mrs. Sherban said the club will make every effort to make the fans feel valued. "We plan to have more give-aways and to recognize birthdays and anniversaries to let them know the Spirit are happy to have them there. You want to be recognized for being a supporter."

The Spirit plan to take their act into the streets of Stouffville to help cement relations with residents of all ages. A special road hockey game is planned at Shoeless Joe's May 12, with past and current Spirit players taking on all comers.

Players will attend local minor hockey practices, spend time with high school teams, and attend community functions. "The guys who play for the Spirit are like the Leafs to the kids of this town," said Mr. Gibson. "So to have a Spirit player come to their practice, wow!"

But while the Spirit want to create a fun atmosphere for their fans, it will be all business on the ice, insists Mr. Gibson. He feels that by letting it be known the team is only interested in players who are hoping to achieve at the highest levels in hockey, the team can continue its climb up the Provincial League ladder. "Our mantra is going to be two fold - to win, and to have our players looking to move on to higher levels like the OHL, university teams, US pro leagues or higher," he said.

Mr. D'Ammizio, who has operated his own hockey school for nine years, has full confidence in his ability to help players realize their potential. He has instructed players who have gone on to the OHL and pro ranks and remains in constant touch with many of those players on an advisory basis. "I've been involved in the development of individuals for quite some time," he said. He points to Corey Trevino, who played with the Spirit this past season, and Ethan Werek, who is the son of Spirit co-owner Zeev and who will debut with the team this fall, as prototypes of the new breed of Spirit player. Both have been guaranteed hockey scholarships at Boston University after playing two years with the Stouffville club. "We want to promote an environment where kids who would like to move up will have the means to do so."

Mr. Gibson said the Spirit will be looking at teams with proven records of success on the ice as they try to continue the team's move upwards. "David (Laren) and Zeev (Werek) have seen that it's the teams that are hungry and driven that succeed in this league. We want to take it to the next level." He said the Aurora Tigers, who won the OPJHL title this spring, have been a model of success. "Jerome Dupont (the Aurora coach) is a great coach and a fantastic recruiter. Obviously we have to use him as the bar right now. They are a successful organization because they work so hard at it." But Mr. D'Ammizio said the Spirit will try to fashion themselves more like last year's champions, the St. Michael's Majors. "They have a good mix of veterans and young players. We don't just want to bring in players for one year."

Mr. Gibson and Mr. D'Ammizio both realize they have a tough act to follow. Both were part of a Spirit team that went to the Provincial League finals in the 2005-06 season, then made a strong showing in this year's



playoffs. Mr. Gibson was the team's assistant coach in 2005-06, and assistant GM last season. Mr. D'Ammizio was an assistant coach for the recently completed season.

"We want to continue the success of the past two seasons," said Mr. D'Ammizio. "It's been exciting so far but we want to take it even further."

"With change there is always skepticism," admitted Mr. Gibson. "We have very, very big shoes to fill, and there's lots of pressure for us to succeed fast. But I'm up to it, and I'm excited to do this in my home town."

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New Stouffville Spirit general manager Matt Gibson (left) feels he's up to the challenge of taking the team up even further than it has gone in recent years. "I'm excited to do this in my home town."



Recently appointed Stouffville Spirit head coach David D'Ammizio wants to see his team become an important rung up the ladder for players looking to realize their hockey dreams.