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NEWS LOCAL

Building a team beyond the talent

By Emma Meldrum

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TIMMINS - A group of boys on a sports team started taking time to celebrate everyone's birthday. One by one in the locker room, they would say something nice about the person, praising their sports skills and acknowledging their qualities.

It was a successful team-building experience, and the type of activity Brenley Shapiro recommends. The sports psychologist was in Timmins this weekend to coach the coaches and players of the Timmins Ringette Association.

Rick Dagenais, who coaches the Timmins Tornados U19A, said he was ecstatic to have the opportunity.

"To have someone come in who is an expert, and guide us, it emphasizes that we're doing the right thing, but also helps us tie it all together," said Dagenais Sunday.

"I've learned a lot already, just in this short session yesterday and this morning, but it's about tying everything in. I think a lot of our coaches were doing a lot of these things, the strategies that she's explaining, but we're not really tying it all together to take full advantage of the work that we're doing," he said. "Bottom line is the girls on the ice and their experience throughout the season."

Dagenais' team of 12 girls were also coached by Shapiro, who led them through exercises and activities.

Dagenais said the young women will have learned a lot by the end of the workshop.

"I'm hoping that they can handle adversity and mistakes a little better, not put so much pressure on themselves, and I think by the end of the day they'll enjoy the experience of playing their sport a lot more. I think that if their level of stress and anxiety about playing decreases, we're going to see also ultimately their performance increase. We're just trying to make them the best ringette players they can be, all around."

The workshop was funded by the Coaches Association of Ontario, which chose 12 sports teams in the province to participate in the Experts Express program.

Shapiro, who runs Heads Up Mental Coaching out of Toronto, said this was the first time she's been sent to do a workshop by plane rather than going to a location within driving distance. It was also her first time in Timmins.

"Probably some of the biggest things that I hope that they learn is to embrace failure and to believe in themselves. I encourage them to not be afraid to reach for the stars and not be afraid to fail. I (think) that things come very easy to the younger generation now," she said.

"We live in a society where everything is at our fingertips. We have Google and Uber and it's all out there. We lose sight of patience for the process and it is hard work, but if they believe in themselves, and they're really willing to work for it, and again it doesn't matter how many times they fail along the way, they can keep standing up."

Shapiro is a cognitive behavioural psychotherapist who started her career in counseling. Then, her kids entered the world of competitive sports.

"I started to see some crazy things going on. I saw this hyper-competitive environment, where there's expectations and pressure that's put on kids, and we're almost treating them like miniature adults. I started to see so much stuff, and kids falling apart when they made mistakes."

Shapiro said sport is supposed to be an amazing journey, not a stressful one.

"That's really what led me to developing Heads Up. What I do is work with people's thinking, feelings, behavioural patterns," she said.

"It's really for me all about building a mindset. That's a mindset for success. We do it through sport, but it really will help you with all aspects of your life, whether it's in school, sport, business. It doesn't matter what type of athlete that you are. It's really building a way of thinking, a way of approaching the world, and really building that mindset for success."

Shapiro said talent is overrated. She said talent may win games, but it doesn't win championships.

"It's about building that team cohesion and having everyone on board, working together towards a common goal, building trust and respect within a dressing room, and that brings a team together."

The sports psychologist said her workshops apply to sports like ringette, but she's also worked with hockey teams, tennis players and marathon runners.