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Sports

Hockey program reaches out

By The Journal News
(Original publication: January 24, 2007)

Josh Thomson

They had an idea, the sponsors and the equipment to spark a resurgence in New Rochelle youth hockey, but they didn't have the players.

When it comes to starting a league, that's the important part.

And that's when Peter Vasapolli and Zev Abraham had a notion. You can even call it a flashback to their childhood. What would spark a 5-year-old's interest in playing hockey better than showing them toys, or, in this case, the equipment?

The plan sounds simple, but when introducing a sport to children who otherwise wouldn't know the rules, it turned into a foolproof solution.

Vasapolli, the New Rochelle Youth Hockey president, and Abraham, the treasurer, took their equipment to a practice for Youth Tackle, the city's youth football program, and made their pitch to flag football players and their parents.

"We're going to award 15-20 scholarships to any kid who wants to play hockey for free," said Vasapolli, paraphrasing the speech. "Your kids can skate for free, play for free and all you need to do is drive them to the rink. And if you can't, we'll try and help you get them a ride."

The show-and-tell worked as well as they could've hoped.

"We wanted to capture the imagination of kids who were inclined to play sports but wouldn't normally play hockey," Abraham said.

A few months later, NRYH has ended its hiatus with the hope of a new initiative: To diversify a sport that has a history of being anything but.

"That was our goal," Vasapolli said of the program, which is called Outreach. "We wanted to make this as diverse as can be. We wanted everyone to be exposed to the sport of hockey. It doesn't matter how much money you have."

Actually, it really doesn't. NRYH took the first 15 families who applied for scholarships, the rich or the poor, and Outreach was born.

Overall, the organization already has 53 4-, 5- and 6-year-olds who skate every Sunday morning at Playland Ice Casino in Rye with the idea of learning an entirely new game.



Liz Orozco/The Journal News

Aidan Lilly, 6, of New Rochelle is tickled by his mother, Vanessa Young, after a recent workout with New Rochelle Youth Hockey's Outreach program.

About the program

New Rochelle Youth Hockey

Intro to hockey clinic: Sundays, Playland Studio Rink, Playland Ice Casino, 8:30-9:15 a.m. and 9:15-10 a.m.

For more information: Phone — 914-391-4080; E-mail — info@nryh.org; Website — www.nryh.org

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Not only are the numbers high, but Vasapolli, Abraham and their colleagues built such a vast portfolio of sponsors that the league, between donations and purchases, has enough equipment to outfit every player free of charge.

"We have an older son (Tyler) and, from previous experience, hockey is very expensive," said Vanessa Lilly, whose 6-year-old son Aidan received an Outreach scholarship. "Between equipment and ice time, it's the only sport that really cost hundreds and hundreds of dollars to play. Now, he gets to try something out without us having to spend money and find out he doesn't like it."

Lilly isn't alone in that belief. Randy Forrest, whose 5-year-old son Jordan is also a scholarship recipient, said not paying to play was a very persuasive part of the program's sales pitch.

"It's a big part for me and for a lot of people," Forrest said. "It's definitely not a cheap sport. For football we pay a registration fee and they give us equipment. I wouldn't even know where to get hockey gear."

Forrest considered his case a great study for what Outreach may do for the city's youth. He played football when he was younger, from Youth Tackle all the way through high school, but said he never knew youth hockey existed. It did, before disappearing earlier this decade, but even when it did exist, Forrest said, people like him weren't involved.

"The crowd that plays football is different than the one that goes to a hockey game," he said.

When the Rangers won the Stanley Cup in 1994, Forrest developed a fondness for hockey. With that - and his desire to see his son experiment in different forms of athletics - Outreach seemed like a treat.

Having the costs covered was the cherry on top.

"I hadn't been looking into hockey, but I always thought it would be fun for him to get into different things," Forrest said. "Football, hockey, they're similar. And they also get to learn ice skating."

To give children the opportunity, the NRYH organizers had to hit Manhattan and the Lower Hudson Valley in search of sponsors. They landed major supporters, such as Nike Bauer, which donated 25 sets of equipment, and Conway Del Genio and Gries, LLC.; Investment Technology Group, Corp.; and Instone, four businesses which donated a large amount of other capital. They also found private businesses and citizens interested in contributing, and Vasapolli said the NRYH has raised nearly \$100,000.

With the strong financial backing and pledge to diversify the program, USA Hockey certified the program over the summer.

"Part of the reason they certified us was because we had a lot of sponsors and children from all walks of life," Abraham said.

Of course, more work lies ahead. The NRYH plans on continuing Outreach every year, which means increasing the program as the current players age and adding more young players - including 15 new scholarship kids - every season. To meet those costs, the organization will need to raise more funds.

Soon, if the new NRYH remains financially sound, the Queen City will soon have the most unique youth program in Westchester, one that resembles the entire community, not just a segment of it.

"Football, baseball, basketball, soccer, all of those sports have a lot of different types of people," Lilly said. "Hockey came out and did Outreach and got another segment of the population that wouldn't have thought twice about doing it."

Honestly, some wouldn't even have thought once. Now they can.

Reach Josh Thomson at jthomson@LoHud.com or 914-696-8289.

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