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Orangeville Wolves special needs hockey team competes in Boston tournament

Written By **Sam Odrowski**

While it can be difficult to find a sports program that accommodates individuals with special needs, the Orangeville Wolves ensures they have that opportunity.

Since 1999, the Orangeville Wolves has provided hockey programming to people with disabilities, helping them to build confidence, develop skills out on the ice, and feel a sense of belonging.

The Orangeville Wolves are a part of Special Hockey International (SHI), a league with teams across North America. The SHI Annual Tournament was held from April 25 to 27 in Boston, Massachusetts, and the Orangeville squad travelled there by bus to take part.

While the team played well on the ice and had lots of fun, there was a hiccup when travelling.

On the way home from the tournament on April 28, there was a collision between the Orangeville Wolves bus and a pickup truck on the QEW in Lincoln, Ont.

The driver of the pickup truck was sent to the hospital with minor injuries.

?[There were] no serious injuries to anyone on the bus, however, it did delay us by 4 hours,? said Orangeville Wolves head coach Martin Porteous.

The Orangeville Wolves play every Sunday on home ice, welcoming all ages and skill levels.

?This program was developed for people with special needs to have a team to call their own, and to be recognized in the community as an athlete,? said Porteous, who's been leading the team since its inception.

Throughout the Orangeville Wolves' season, they play eight home games and six away games, in addition to several practice sessions.

The teams they play against this year are located in Kitchener, Brampton, Innisfil, Barrie, Grey Bruce, Grandravine and Woolwich.

The SHI Tournament in Boston had teams from all over Canada, the United States, and even England.

The Orangeville Wolves fundraised to cover the cost of a hotel room and travel with the team bus for all its players.

The annual tournament provides the team with opportunities they might not otherwise have, Porteous noted.

?It's a little bit overwhelming sometimes for some of the players, because some of them on the team have never been on a bus before or stayed in a hotel room,? said Porteous. ?This is just a phenomenal program ? that we are lucky enough to have places to take these kids and adults to play other teams. The tournament is just one of those exceptional events that gives these kids memories forever.?

David Vahey, whose son Solomon, 11, plays for the Orangeville Wolves, said the Boston trip had a really positive impact on his son.

?It was amazing. The whole crowd saw Solomon skate on his own to centre ice for several face-offs. It felt great for Solomon to receive a rink-full of applause for momentous things for him like passing to another player. Where most wouldn't blink an eye, he

had an arena full of people happy to celebrate with him,? Vahey said. ?His smile and glee was visible to everyone at the rink.?

The Orangeville Wolves started 25 years ago with just seven players, one of whom still participates in the program today. There are now over 20 players who make up the team.

Porteous said he wasn't sure what he was getting into when he was asked to coach the Orangeville Wolves. At that time, he wasn't even aware that the program was for people with special needs. But after his first session out on the ice, he never looked back.

?I just fell in love with the whole concept, and these kids and adults, and everything about the program,? said Porteous.

Over the years, he's observed significant changes in those who play for the Orangeville Wolves. In the past few, three kids who struggled to stand up on skates are all skating on their own now.

?Things don't happen overnight for any athlete, but they have progressed greatly, as have our senior players, and, more advanced players,? said Porteous. ?They get coached the same way. Pretty much everybody does the same drills. I teach them all different aspects of the game, very simple aspects ? passing, shooting, teamwork, and skating. It's just a great program.?

He added, ?I've had kids who cried for two years straight, and I've taught them to love hockey.?

Vahey's son Solomon has been playing for the Orangeville Wolves for the past three years.

While he could barely skate when he started, he's excelled greatly out on the ice and has become very enthusiastic about the sport.

?He's actually interested in skating now and I can see that he's got a lot of team spirit,? said Vivian Petho, Solomon's mother. ?He gets very excited when other people score.?

She shared that the hockey program has been great for building Solomon's confidence and a sense of camaraderie with his teammates.

?It really creates a sense of belonging, like you're part of your community, you're part of a team ? and that means something,? Petho said.

She also noted the importance of offering sports programs like the Orangeville Wolves to people with disabilities who may not fit the mould of regular sports teams.

?Everybody should get a chance to play if they want to, and having an organization like this gives the opportunity,? said Petho. ?It has given a lot of people a chance to go out there and play a sport that they want to play without having to worry about judgment and the other parts of trying to play on a team.?

While the Orangeville Wolves' season is now complete, its players will be back on the ice in the fall.