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Local youngster shares the ice with Bobby Orr

By Jim Barber/Napanee Guide

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One young Napanee hockey player had the hockey clinic of a lifetime last weekend.

Six-year-old Marshall McFarland participated in the Chevrolet Safe and Fun Hockey Clinic at the new General Motors Centre in Oshawa last Saturday.

On the ice with him, and 99 other Ontario youngsters, was none other than former Canadian Olympic women's hockey gold medalist, and multi-time world champion Cassie Campbell, as well as Hockey Hall of Fame member Bobby Orr.

Orr and Campbell, along with another hall of fame member, Mike Bossy, are instructors and spokespeople for the Safe and Fun program, which aims to teach hockey players between the ages of five and eight, as well as parents and coaches, to uphold the values of respect and responsibility.

Marshall's dad Howard said of the random draw that landed Marshall at the event, "It was an online thing. I think it was at the Chevrolet site, and I put his name in back in August and forgot about it, actually. And it was just kind of out of the blue that he was picked to go."

Marshall was the only player from Napanee to attend the special camp with Orr and Campbell.

At six, obviously Marshall was too young to have seen Orr play during his NHL career, which spanned the late 1960s into the mid-1970s.

But thanks to modern technology, he was able to find out about the Boston Bruins great's on-ice prowess.

"We watched a lot of YouTube videos and stuff to show him who Bobby Orr was. He actually already had a book about Bobby Orr too, so he kind of had a general idea," said Howard.

Marshall said he was pretty excited to meet Orr, and that getting his picture taken with the hockey legend was the highlight of the weekend.

"Bobby was a nice guy," said Marshall. "I learned a lot."

He said they scrimmaged and had some fun drills on the ice, and learned about respect and responsibility, the two 'Rs' that are at the core of the program's message.

"They were on the ice for an hour playing little games and stuff. Then they gave them a tour of the GM Centre and went through the Oshawa Sports Hall of Fame. They had lunch together and went through the Oshawa Generals dressing room and met some of the players and stuff. So it was a good day," said Howard.

Orr and Campbell got involved with the Safe and Fun hockey program back in its inception a decade ago.

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Orr said it was because he was worried about some of the conduct he was seeing and hearing about at minor hockey games, from parents, coaches and players.

"I thought back to my days in minor hockey and they were some of my fondest memories. But I was seeing kids being treated poorly. And I truly believe minor sports, minor hockey, and any sport in the community is for fun and recreation," Orr told the Napanee Guide.

"And coaches, parents, officials on the ice and the kids have to help ... they all have to work together to make sure it's a great experience for everybody."

Orr said the two Rs apply to everyone involved in the minor hockey system.

"We are the adults. We have no control over what goes on at the professional level, but we're supposed to have some control over what goes on with our kids' program. So, the organizers, the parents in the stands, the coaches behind the bench, we have to work together to make sure it's a happy experience for everybody. But unfortunately, it's not a great experience for everybody."

He said that part of the problem is that hockey is becoming too serious too soon, that some coaches are coaching like NHL bench bosses, with systems and psychological tactics. Some parents behave as if their children are surefire NHLers, but Orr knows this isn't true and that the increasing professionalization of minor hockey is sucking the fun out of it.

"We aren't saying 'don't chase your dreams.' Chase your dream to be a professional player, but as you go, understand that less than one per cent of all the kids playing hockey will play one game in the NHL," Orr said. "And while we're teaching the fundamentals, let's teach values like respect and responsibility, being a good teammate, being a good friend."

Orr added that the values taught through hockey are also applicable to life.

"I learned that I could approach my business today the way I approached my hockey in the past. I had to be responsible. I had to be respectful."

He told parents and coaches, in the Safe is Fun adult session held the night before, to relax, and let the kids learn at their own pace.

"The kids, they all move at different speeds. Some come along a little quicker than others. Phil Esposito was cut from his midget team. Brett Hull, I don't think he even got drafted. Cam Neely, he couldn't play in Vancouver, so they traded him to Boston.

"We're all in a hurry. Slow down. Let them go at their own pace," he said.

"If your son or daughter has the ability to play in the NHL, or on the Olympic team, they'll get their chance, if they look after themselves, and continue to play."

Campbell had a similar message.

"It's all backwards to me. It's minor sports. It's about going to hockey tournaments, hanging out in the hotel pool, having fun with your friends," she said. "Those relationships that you build. The characteristics you learn from sport, we're just missing the whole boat on that. And I think that's what this program is trying to say.

"It's gotten ridiculous ... these kids think they're playing professional hockey. It's minor hockey, and I think we need to remember that," Campbell added.

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