

# ONTARIO CHAMP



PHOTO: VINTAGE LAX

# ORILLIA KINGS NOVICES: A ONE-OF-A-KIND SEASON

>> BY DONNA PARIS

**PICTURE THIS: IT'S THE FIRST GAME OF** the season, the parents are cheering and the kids are excited. They lose the game. "That's OK", everyone says; "We'll get them next time". Except they don't. Or the game after that. And not the one after that, either. The team ends the season with zero wins, 22 losses.

Actually, most of the kids on the Orillia Kings Novice 2 team (9 & 10-year olds) had never played lacrosse before.

"It was a team that was mostly new, so we started at the beginning, teaching the basics: catching and throwing," says Brent Burgin, the coach, whose grandson Walker Lazier



played on the team. In fact, there were a few skilled players, but the other teams would figure that out quickly and put a checker on the ball carrier, says Burgin. “Throughout the season, we taught them how to manoeuvre the ball around to each other and set up passing plays.”

Some games were big losses and some were close, like the one tournament game that ended in a tie. “At the shootout, we went over half our team before the other team scored, and our kids were so happy they came so close,” says Garry Balkwill, the assistant coach.

“Of course there were moments of discouragement, but the coaches were fantastic, the kids enjoyed each other and the practices, too,” says Stephanie Stanton, the team manager. “It was a group of parents that got along really well, and it got playful for us — always asking, “When are we going to get that first win?!”

Did the kids get down? Start skipping practices? Move to another team? Nope. And not

only were they not discouraged, they looked forward to playing. “They were just having fun, they would get beat bad and be having a great old time high-fiving each other after the game,” says Burgin. “A lot of that had to do with the assistant coach, Garry — he’s a lacrosse legend.”

The strategy? “The kids would do everything we worked on in practice in bits and pieces — everything we asked of the kids, they did it,” says Balkwill. And he made it fun for them, too, getting down and doing demos on the floor that would make the kids start laughing. “I never got beat this bad in my life — I was having fun and they were having fun — but I was really taking a ribbing from the guys at the coffee shop,” he adds.

But Garry was no pushover, says team parent Heather Reda. “Garry has so much experience, and he’s not one to sugar-coat the situation,” she says. “He would call a spade a spade — and that’s important for the kids to hear that.”

When it was time to attend provincials at the Ontario Lacrosse Festival, truly, no one expected much. But then came the first win...

“I don’t know who was more excited to finally get that moment — the kids or the parents!” laughs Fred Bosco, whose son Sam played on the team. Another parent, Jason Beers, (son Ethan) admits he was shaking the last five minutes of the game, thinking: “Is this really going to happen”.

“The kids were working hard and getting better, the determined coaching staff backed and encouraged them, and it’s as if they woke up one day at the end of the season — when we won the first game, the kids were on Cloud 9,” says Beers.

“The best part was seeing them do it, knowing they had it in them, thinking we had a chance — and once they got the first win, they were like sharks with blood in the water: it was finally a taste of victory.”

And talk to anyone on this team, they talk about the goalie, Nathan Donnelly. At first, the team had no goalie. But Beers, who was playing wall ball with his son one night, noticed Nathan watching them. Beers asked if he had ever played lacrosse; he hadn’t. Then Beers told him he had an extra stick and asked if he was interested in playing. “He just wanted to play, and he was an unbelievable goalie. He took to it like a fish to water,” says Beers. “In the end he won all these awards — MVP for the team, goalie of the year — it was awesome.”

Reality came knocking on the door in their next game, a 10-1 loss to the Lincoln Crush.

“The loss never even fazed them,” says Beers. “We went out for dinner that night, and we went into the next game with every kid completely positive”.

“Sometimes after a loss like that, you hear the parents say, at least we’re going home with the silver, but not us. The coaches and the parents, we all said, ‘We are going for gold here!’” says Reda. “We lost that game, they got hammered, but the kids were not giving up.” Perhaps, she adds, it was precisely because they had lost so many times that once the game was over, it was really over for the kids. They did not carry it around with them, instead, they put it behind them.

Which was a very good thing, because after their 6-3 victory over Six Nations, they advanced to a Novice F final rematch against Lincoln.

But this time Balkwill had a plan. “The final game, I had a kid on our team who turned out to be the best player,” he says.

“He came along really well, and he played three fantastic games. He gets very emotional.” So Balkwill took him aside before the game with an important challenge: “I have a job for you: every time a certain player from the other team is on the floor; you go on the floor (to make sure he doesn’t score).” And that he did — playing great one-on-one defence the entire game.

“The first time we played this team, we barely touched the ball, the other team was in complete control, but it was the exact opposite in the final,” says Bosco. “It was like we were a different team, we were so aggressive.” Final score? Orillia 8, Lincoln 1.

Bosco attributes the win to their dedication: “Their hard work paid off: those boys loved going to practice, they believed in the practice, and they kept working (hard). I have a lot of pride for my own son and every player on this team,” he said.

The biggest lesson learned?

“On the very first day, half of the kids on the team couldn’t catch the ball,” says Stanton. “And when you look at where they started from and where they ended the season, that was the real win — it’s a great testament to the fact that hard work and tenacity can really pay off.”

And, so, there it is. A real-life Cinderella story. Just waiting for a big Hollywood movie producer to get on the ball and scoop it up. **OLM**