

## Love of hockey drives player

Robert McKay started playing last year and hasn't looked back since

BY CHRIS O'LEARY, EDMONTON JOURNAL JANUARY 25, 2010



Swat Ice Hawks assistant coach Bernie Ferbey congratulates Robert McKay on his two goals in their gold-medal win against the Knights of Columbus Shock at Kinsmen Arena in Edmonton on January 23, 2010 for Edmonton Minor Hockey Week.

**Photograph by:** Ryan Jackson, edmontonjournal.com

On Saturday, the peewee SWAT (South West Athletic Teams) Ice Hawks gave their coaches and families something that's become as rare as a blue moon in Edmonton: A joyous post-game dressing room.

The Black Eyed Peas blared over a portable stereo in the tiny room at Kinsmen Arena on Saturday, after the Ice Hawks topped the Knights of Columbus Shock 5-2 for a Quikcard Minor Hockey Week gold medal. High-fives and fist-pounds abounded in the wake of the team's biggest win of its season.

For Ice Hawks right winger Robert McKay, a day of preparation and waiting had paid off in full. The 13-year-old bookended his team's scoring, with a goal 14 seconds into play and a hard-fought empty-net goal in the game's final minutes.

"He turned it up a notch," says McKay's coach, Ken LeBlanc. But LeBlanc had figured he'd get as much from his top player.

Sitting in the kitchen of his Belgravia home on Saturday at 11:30 a.m., 90 minutes before his game started, McKay admitted that he was getting increasingly nervous as the tournament progressed.

After losing their opening game, the Ice Hawks won their next two in overtime en route to Saturday's final. McKay assisted on both game-winners.

So far, a cold he's been battling is the only thing that's been able to slow him down on the ice. A late joiner in the local minor hockey system, McKay just started playing last year, having played soccer the previous five years. A power-skating class shored up his skating skills and once he hit the ice with his team, he hasn't looked back. He jumped schools in September to attend Our Lady of Mount Carmel to take part in its hockey academy. He estimates that he's got 20 points this year in 16 or 17 games.

"Most kids, they get introduced to (hockey) at age four," he says.

"But ... when I was young, we'd go skating but I'd just play in the snowbanks.

"(My parents) didn't think I'd like hockey, but (once I played) I really liked it," he recalls. "I liked it better than soccer."

"We thought every Canadian boy needs to learn how to play hockey and learn how to skate," McKay's mother Kathy explains.

"I was speaking to one of the soccer moms and she was saying, 'If you want him to try it, you've got to do it now. Otherwise, it's too late once they get into bantam,' " Kathy said.

A look around the family's home shows just how much hockey has consumed Robert. A discarded stick from an Oilers practice hangs on Robert's bedroom wall, surrounded by photos of his favourite Oilers.

"The basement is where (Robert) learned to shoot -- and drywall," jokes Peter Toth, Robert's dad. A full-sized hockey net rests against a wall in the family's basement. Peter took a piece of carpet underlay and sprayed it with truck box-liner, then hung it in the net for his son, to help him shoot more accurately. He has a sheet of plastic on the floor, about 10 feet away from the net where he stacks the pucks and tweaks his shots before a game.

Above the net on the wall are puck-sized white marks, where Robert has filled in his divots. He takes, "Five, 10, 20 minutes, whatever I have," he says, to try to take some shots before he plays. He then grabs his gear out of a spare room downstairs and packs his bag. The whole family -- Robert, Peter, Kathy and Robert's older sister Kristine, 14, -- are off to Kinsmen Arena for the big game.

There is no strategy talk in the family minivan on the way to the rink. Peter is a competitive cyclist, while Kathy figure skated as a child. As he hops out of the minivan, Peter tells his son to work hard and have fun.

LeBlanc stands outside of the Ice Hawks dressing room with two of his assistant coaches, Bernie Ferbey and Dave Gordon, greeting the players as they arrive and talking with the parents. When the team's goaltender, Miguel Oco shows up, he's all smiles, eager to tell his teammates about being at Friday's Oilers-Dallas Stars game.

Oco looks tiny heading into the dressing room. In his equipment, he isn't much bigger. There's a sizable gap between the top of his head and the crossbar, and with the players on his team and on the opposing Knights of Columbus Shock towering above him, it's understandable that he gets nervous before games.

"When he gets in the game, he's really amazing," Robert says of his teammate. "Our goalie is pretty much the reason why we're in the gold-medal game and that's why we're first in the league."

Inside the room, the kids excitedly put their equipment on. LeBlanc quiets them down for a pre-game speech. He tells them that it's OK to be nervous, that it just means you want to play hard and do well. He says that if the team can play smart, confident, aggressive hockey, they'll have a good chance of winning.

"You're the best team in this division," he says. Play confident, play aggressive, play smart and you'll be piling on each other (when it's over). Don't pile on Miguel -- he's too small."

The team laughs and LeBlanc reminds them to have fun.

"Some of you have been in hockey eight years and we've never been in a gold-medal game," he says. "We may never get there again. A lot of you will be in bantam next year and it's harder at bantam, at midget. So enjoy it, have fun."

From his team's bench, LeBlanc points out the obvious about the Shock: They're huge. Looking at three players who are on the ice that appear to be six feet tall in skates, the team has an obvious intimidation factor on their side. Ice Hawks assistant coach Ferbey has an equalizer lined up, though.

The players are lined up at the exit of the dressing room, waiting. Ferbey sets his iPod stereo up on the bench and hits play. As the music starts, the fog machine he has set up at ice level begins to churn out smoke. One by one, the players burst onto the ice and begin to circle their side of the rink, their enthusiasm obvious.

"I've had the machine for a few years," Ferbey says. "I bring it out once or twice a year for special games."

When Oco brings a water bottle over to the bench, LeBlanc takes the bottle and puts his arm around the goalie.

"Don't be nervous today, Miguel," he says. "You're the best goalie in this league."

Before the game starts, LeBlanc says that the extra attention of having a reporter and a photographer following him around all day won't negatively affect Robert.

"Robert, he'll have the game of his life. He's one of those kids," he says. "He'll be on the ice and he'll know you're there and there are so many parents and families in the stands ... some kids will get nervous and some kids will pick up their games."

The prediction takes all of 14 seconds to start to ring true. Off the opening faceoff, Robert fires a slap-shot five-hole on the Shock goalie, giving his team a 1-0 lead. Robert's teammate, Brandon Webb, makes it 2-0.

The Shock make a game of it, getting a shot past Oco, but forward Alex Simpson puts the Ice Hawks up 3-1 less than two minutes later.

"I like that two-goal buffer," Peter says as the first 15-minute period winds down. Kathy, meanwhile, cringes with every bodycheck thrown, though none of the players are hurt in the game.

"I'll never get used to the checking," she says.

The Shock strike early in the second period, just 54 seconds in, making it a one-goal game once again. But all comeback hopes are squashed a couple of minutes later, when Ice Hawks defenceman Zac Spady swings the momentum for good.

Like Robert, Spady is inexperienced in minor hockey, having just gotten back into the game last season after a year of pre-novice play. The football player in him is evident when he plows over a Shock player in the defensive end. He shows his quickly progressing speed as he flies up the ice and rips a wrist shot over the Shock's goaltender on the glove-hand side, putting his team up 4-2.

Shock goalies Peter Fortis and Cole Sieben work together to keep their team within two goals the rest of the second and third period. Trailing by a pair with a few minutes remaining, the Shock pull their goalie and set the stage for Robert.

With a defender blanketed on him from the minute he hits centre ice, Robert fights his way into the Shock zone and manages to get a shot off on the open net to cement the win. When the buzzer sounds, black hockey gloves go flying into the air. Oco throws down his blocker and glove, with both fists raised up. His teammates swarm him, but manage to keep their coach's instructions in mind and allow their goalie to stay on his feet.

"That was as perfect a game as I've seen them play," LeBlanc says in the dressing room after the team received its gold medals and trophy. The parents begin to pile into the room, congratulating their sons and the other kids in the room. Oco gets fist-pounds from numerous parents. "You're the man, Miguel," one parent tells the smiling goalie.

"I didn't really think I'd score at the start of the game," Robert says. "I was surprised." After he leaves the dressing room and makes his way into the lobby of the arena, his sister runs up to Robert and hugs him, telling him how well he played.

With Robert's first Minor Hockey Week gold medal secured, there's only one thing left to do.

"We better phone Grandma," Kathy says as the family nears their home. "She's going to be pretty excited."

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