

## Hockey is our business, and business is good

The city's schools, camps and clinics are bursting at the seams

**Rita Mingo, For The Calgary Herald**

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**Jenel Bode of Torjager Hockey gives pupil Hilly Brown some one-on-one time at Silver Springs Community Centre.**

Little Bobby can't seem to hit the broadside of a barn with his slap shot.

But never fear. There are more than just a few individuals out there who make it their business to see that he improves sooner . . . or perhaps later.

In this city, there's a wealth of hockey enrichment programs for kids and adults alike, during every part of the year.

Can't make it at Christmas? Then wait for the Easter sessions. Going away at Easter? Then there's a summer camp just waiting for you. But don't wait too long -- they fill up quickly.

Such is the nature of the hockey business in Calgary. It has grown -- and continues to grow -- to such an extent that instructors of the fine art of the game might find themselves a little Vitamin D deficient with all the time they spend indoors, even in the summer.

Rex Tucker gave up his career in finance and marketing to become a full-time instructor as director of Tucker Hockey Enterprises. Since 2002, he's been skating onto the ice about 500 times a year, working with minor hockey teams and adults, customizing programs for all ages.

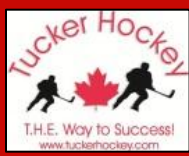
"It's a mixed bag," notes Tucker. "I know Toronto brags about being the mecca of hockey, but Calgary is very unique . . . because of its size, its affluence, the facilities, because of the popularity of the Flames.

"I don't think I could run this business in other centres."

Tucker's fees are in keeping with other programs in the city. Working with a minor hockey team comes to \$200 an hour (plus GST), while he charges \$125 an hour for one-on-one instruction.

With nearly 13,000 kids playing at the minor level and another 20,000 adults involved in the sport, "it's quite a market," he admits.

"I think in 2004, with the Flames' playoff drive, we saw more and more people getting into hockey. My feeling is that it's best to gravitate to a sport, whether it's hockey, baseball, or whatever, rather than hanging in the malls.



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"And we're getting more ethnic people wanting to be a part of Canadiana. They see their friends playing hockey and they want to learn, as well."

Often, though not always, Tucker isn't sure if he's serving the child or the parent.

"It's a combination. Sometimes it's parents living the dream through their kids," he acknowledges. "They want to get their kids to the next level or a collegiate scholarship, and some kids don't have the work ethic. But then there are kids who say, 'Dad, I need some instruction.' I had a lady call me at Christmas who said her 15-year-old asked her if he could enrol."

The Top Guns program has been running for the past 10 years and its growth, too, has been meteoric.

"I started 10 years ago. It was a Friday morning out of Acadia (Recreation Complex), and I had 30 kids," recounts Dale Paulsen, director of the program. "After two years, it had grown so much that we had to rent out the Oakridge arena. So we went from 30 one early morning to an entire facility and about 300 kids."

These days, Top Guns runs in Fish Creek, Cardel Place and Springbank, catering to 800 kids in the spring hockey sessions. But Paulsen says they, too, are running into a familiar obstacle.

"There's not a lot of ice time," he notes, "so parents are forced to put kids in hockey 10 months a year."

Specializing in pond hockey, Top Gun camps last spring were filled to capacity by Jan. 15 and they had to turn away "25 per cent more." This year's Easter Ice Skills camps are five-and-a-half hours of instruction for novices and atoms, and cost \$136.50. Peewees are on the ice for four hours at a cost of \$105.

"We specialize in developing elite players," Paulsen points out. "We try to help develop those kids so they'll go high in the WHL draft."

One of their most famous alumni is Thomas Hickey of the Western Hockey League's Seattle Thunderbirds, a fourth overall pick by the Los Angeles Kings in last year's NHL draft. "He came to me as a six-year-old guy and he said, 'Mr. Paulsen, I want to make it to the NHL,' " Paulsen recalls.

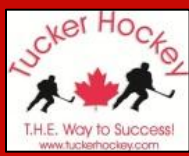
And that's certainly one element that drives kids -- and their parents -- to hone their hockey skills all year long. They believe they'll have an edge on the next guy but, really, the next guy is doing the same thing.

The precious practice times that minor hockey teams enjoy are often used for quality instruction, which means that coaches are signing up experts to impart their knowledge to the little sponges on the ice.

One of those experts is Jenel Bode, the head instructor at Torjager Hockey. Torjager, owned by Marty Yewchuk, a former member of Canada's national team, is another Calgary-based organization offering team and individual on-ice instruction throughout the year.

Bode, a former member of the Oval X-Treme who presently plays with the Strathmore Rockies of the Western Women's Hockey League, is a full-time employee and an occasional substitute teacher.

A team session with Torjager will run \$200, or \$175 if they sign up for consecutive sessions. If they bring along their goalie coach, that'll tack on an extra \$75 to the session.



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Bode, with Torjager for four years, also engages in private lessons, often at the Olympic Oval during public skating.

She spent 10 months recently coaching in New Zealand ("believe it or not, Kiwis can play") and plans to return there during their winter. But her days in Calgary are filled with daily instruction, for which kids and parents are clamouring.

"I think with the development of hockey in general, there is more of a concentration on individual skills," she explains. "When I was growing up, there were some camps, but private lessons were not an option for us. There are just more opportunities for greater development. There's more of a focus on skating; in my opinion, it's the most important skill in the game. And it's sometimes overlooked."

One individual who knows all about the power of skating is Audrey Bakewell, guru to the NHL stars. A truckload of pros have benefited from her personal instruction, including Sidney Crosby, Jarome Iginla and Daymond Langkow of the Calgary Flames, and two of the smoothest skaters to ever grace a sheet of ice, Paul Coffey and Scott Niedermayer.

Bakewell, a professional instructor since 1976, runs summer camps in Calgary, Edmonton, Vancouver and Osoyoos, B.C.

"I pretty well pick my work, always have," she chuckles. "I've become extremely particular. It's a school and they're there to learn. I have never babysat."

Each year, Bakewell accepts invitations to work with minor hockey organizations in places such as Switzerland, Germany and the Czech Republic.

Because of her vast experience, she possesses the uncanny knack of immediately knowing the type of player she's dealing with and the problems they can run into.

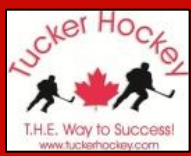
"I think the key is the analysis factor," she points out. "I can analyze a player by just watching him walk to the ice. When I started with (Columbus Blue Jackets') Gilbert Brule, I saw that he had a problem with his skates and they finally realized he needed orthotics. But no one had picked up on it."

"It's like with abdominal injuries; you have to start looking at the equipment and what changes have occurred. You have to look at what the kids are wearing. Sticks are another thing; many times, they don't fit their bodies and that contributes to injuries."

"I'll say time and time again, you don't need it! You can have too much equipment. But there's a huge change in what businesses are making. A stick manufacturer used to make \$40,000 and now makes \$200,000 -- you think they'll tell them not to use that stick?"

Not to be forgotten, netminders, too, can get their share of individualized sessions. David Marcoux, goaltending coach for the Calgary Flames, has been running a camp during the summer in Calgary for the past three years. He also holds them in Quebec and Ontario.

"I first got started during the lockout year," he explains. "We do all age groups, from atoms to pros, but we don't have a lot of space for the younger kids."



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The demand is such that Marcoux could probably hold more sessions than he does, but he obviously needs time away from the rink for himself and his family during the summer, so he limits what he offers.

"We like to build good habits when they're younger and we like to see them come back year after year," he says of his camps.

"It's not just a one-time thing; if the parents and kids like what's going on, then we keep working with the same kids. There's some exclusivity there. The kids that have bought in for three years, they've stuck with it and they have that priority."

This summer, his camp for the atoms, peewees and bantams will be held the last week of July. He's added another camp for the midget and junior ages for the first week in August.

"In terms of growth, we want to maintain quality over quantity," he explains. "We want to maintain a high standard."

Due perhaps to his most noted pupil -- Vezina winner Miikka Kiprusoff -- Marcoux's camps have an international appeal.

"At one point, we had a Japanese goalie," he notes, "from the elite league in Japan. He had a Canadian coach who had heard about the program and they paid for their goaltender to come over. It's really interesting to see the mix. You get a 28-year-old who's like a kid in a candy shop, scribbling in his notebook, learning about the position."

It appears that Calgarians aren't the only ones investing in the business of hockey