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YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Four-day youth assembly a springboard to positive change for local student. See story, page 17.

No rest for the dedicated

For elite level hockey players, on-ice excellence requires off-ice discipline

BY AMY CROFTS
Staff Writer

Clenched fists beat, moving black pads. Heads duck hurdle after hurdle. Legs powerfully spring up and land on the angled sides of a Russian Box.

These athletes aren't training for the Olympics, they play minor hockey.

Matt Murray is one of those players. During the off-season, he spends four to five days a week at the gym doing speed and strength training.

Murray is 15 years old.
"You lose sleep because you have to get up early for runs (and) you're not able to talk to a lot of friends because you're trying to better yourself," he said of his 11-year dedication to the sport.

"Basically, I'd sacrifice anything that's necessary to do it because it's my dream. It's my dream to play hockey for a living (and) to play for as long as I possibly can."

Much like their NHL heroes who are off the ice come the end of April, the off-season isn't a vacation for many minor hockey athletes that wish to make it to the big leagues. Their summers aren't just filled with on-ice sprints and stick handling clinics, dryland training consists of everything from sprints and hurdles, to plyometrics and mixed martial arts.

At Athletes Nation Sports Performance Centre in St. Albert, 90 per cent of athletes that train in the summer are hockey players, explained Brad McNamara, head strength and conditioning coach.

He describes off-season training as "intense" where male and female hockey players aged 11 to 16 will come from all over Alberta to train five days a week for two-and-a-half to three hours per day. The focus of training is to build speed and power.

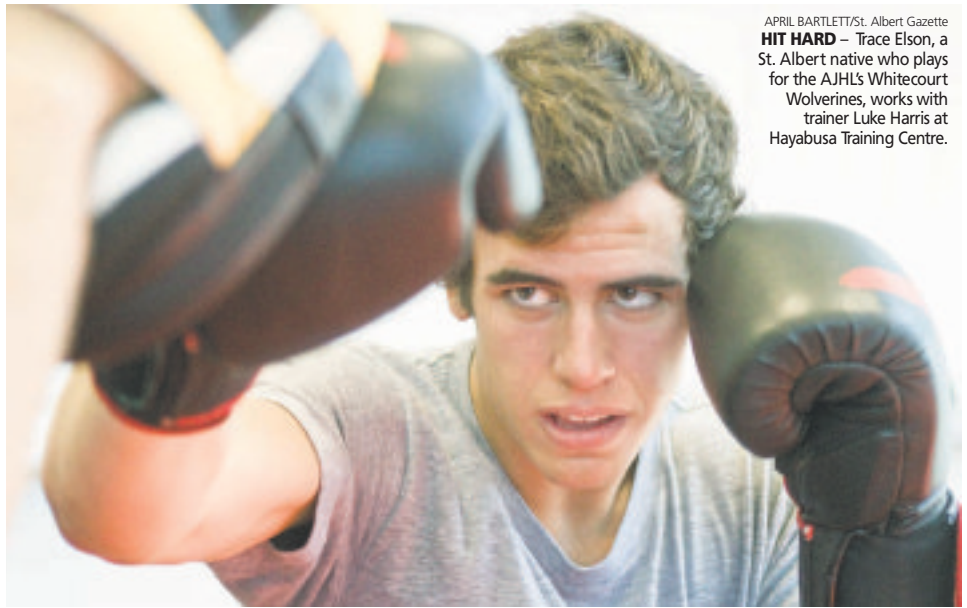
"The first thing they notice at camp is how fast you are and how powerful you are," said McNamara. "You may be able to stay on the ice and skate the whole time but if you're not going to win a battle to the puck ... then no one is going to notice you."

At Athletes Nation, players alternate between days of high intensity central nervous system (CNS) workouts, with cardio and general fitness. Triggering different muscles via rapid stimulation of the brain and spinal cord with activities such as sprints and plyometrics has been shown to enhance speed and explosive power. The key tenet of CNS training is repetitions – the quality of the execution is stressed rather than the quantity.

Among coaches, a favourite piece of training equipment is the Russian Box, an apparatus made of two planks at a 45-degree angle, forming a "V" shape. When players jump from side-to-side, they activate their core muscles as well as build single leg strength and explosive power. Dodging hurdles increases mobility, while slide boards – where athletes don nylon booties and take strides on a lacquered plank – simulate lateral movement on the ice.

Cross-training in other sports besides hockey is key, noted McNamara, the difference in the athleticism of young players is obvious when they've only been involved in one sport.

"Their motor skills aren't always there and they don't know how to run because they don't play any running



APRIL BARTLETT/St. Albert Gazette
HIT HARD – Trace Elson, a St. Albert native who plays for the AJHL's Whitecourt Wolverines, works with trainer Luke Harris at Hayabusa Training Centre.



APRIL BARTLETT/St. Albert Gazette
CROSS TRAINING – Liam Thomas, 16, from St. Albert trains at Athletes Nation as part of his minor midget AAA training regimen. Off-season training for hockey players places a high degree of focus on improving speed, explosive power and lateral movement.



APRIL BARTLETT/St. Albert Gazette
BOY IN THE BOX – Midget AAA player Jake Mercier, 15, trains on the Russian Box at Athletes Nation in Campbell Business Park. This device activates the core muscles while also building leg strength and explosive power.

sports," he said.

"When we were growing up, kids played a lot of different sports at a young age. Since I came to Alberta and started in this industry, it seems like a lot of guys are choosing one sport – especially hockey."

Mixing up different skill sets is why both professional and minor hockey players come to Luke Harris, owner and trainer at Hayabusa Mixed Martial Arts.

"It offers a good way to cross train," he said of the Brazilian jiu-jitsu, muay-thai, wrestling, boxing and kickboxing disciplines that are intertwined and used to further develop hand and foot coordination in hockey players.

"It's not just all hockey fighting. A lot of it is offensive and defensive drills ... it takes them out of their comfort zone (and) it builds confidence."

The mental game

Apart from the physical aspects of off-season training, players and coaches alike credit the importance of having your head in the game to improve performance.

"You have to be willing to give it day in and day out," said Murray, of the professional hockey players he admires.

"You have to be in that mindset that you can do it, push yourself and not take no for an answer."

As part of summer programming at goalie school Gold in the Net, players receive a special lecture series on "mental toughness."

"A lot of times at a regular team practice you have 18 players and two goalies, the focus has to shift to the team," said Erick Robertson, owner of the St. Albert franchise. "That's why we get a lot of goalies training with us throughout the season, to get that tune-up or confidence boost."

He notes that as players advance to more elite levels, the stakes get higher as does the mental capacity to handle them. The qualities of pro-athletes are similar to those that Murray looks up to.

"The ones that we see move on are made from the same cloth. They have a tremendous work ethic," he said. "Even when you're on a team, there is always someone trying to replace you."

Robertson acknowledged that the goal for many young athletes is to play professionally, but that goal isn't always realistic.

"The percentages of guys that actually move on and play pro hockey or get

scholarships is very low," he explained, adding that it's most important to teach the values instilled in hockey and have players carry them forward into everyday life.

"We make the guys better athletes, we can't make them better players," added McNamara. "It's the skills acquisition – going out on the ice, shooting in their basement, practicing their stick handling – that are going to make them better players."

"If you combine the two together, that's when the guys really take it to the next level."

Whether it be raw talent or drive, reaching that next level is only attainable for the select few, a group Trace Elson strives to be in.

The 18-year-old from St. Albert trains at both Athletes Nation and Hayabusa. He played for the Red Deer Rebels from 2011 to 2012 and for the Whitecourt Wolverines last year. His older brother Turner was signed to a free agent contract with the Calgary Flames in 2011.

"It's a lot of work," admitted Elson. "But it has kind of pushed me even more. I just want to be where he is and hopefully it happens."

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