

Providing Type 1 diabetic players with a big assist

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Katarina Gustafsson says her son Rasmus has come a long way when it comes to managing his diabetes.

And she's not referring to the 12-plus hour travel time that's brought her to the Milton Sports Centre (MSC).

"I've seen a big difference from before to after," said Katarina, who's journeyed from their home just outside of Stockholm, Sweden to bring Rasmus — for a second summer, mind you — to the local Dskate hockey camp. "It's been a good influence."

Her son heartily agrees.

"Sometimes I'm shy about it (my diabetes). But not here." said Rasmus, a 14-year-old forward who competes — to the best of his estimation — at the equivalent of the double-A level back home. "I've been to other camps, but there's not one like this in Sweden."

Now in its third year, Dskate — offering camps in Milton and Montreal — is open to players of all skill levels with Type-1 diabetes.

Having already doubled in size since its inception — sporting 81 players this week at MSC — the camp blends a comprehensive education for young athletes to better manage their diabetes and a high-end hockey program.

"The hockey part of the camp is always evolving, so the players will have a different experience each summer," said camp creator Steve Hindle, who grew up in a Type-1 diabetes household and is fighting to eliminate some of the isolation many youth feel regarding their ailment — particularly in the realm of sports. "Even though it's for kids with diabetes, it's still got to be about hockey and be fun or they won't want to come back."

The fact that Gustafssons have returned from overseas — as have a number of players from across the U.S. — speaks volumes to the demand for such a camp.

"Actually, Rasmus won't be the only player from Sweden next year. They've encouraged another family from over there to come to the Montreal camp," noted Hindle, whose camp includes such Type-1 diabetic athletes as former Olympic rower Chris Jarvis and NHLers like Cory Conacher and Nick Boynton (retired). "When the family that's furthest away is the fastest to re-sign, plus the fact that we've doubled in size in just two years and have 30 families on a waiting list now, clearly the right things are going on here."

Stressing that his camp's foundation could be adopted by other sports, he sees Dskate as having "no borders" and "no ceiling" in terms of its potential for expansion.

The inclusion of players from as far as California, Alaska, B.C. and Newfoundland — as well as Sweden — offer strong evidence of that.

Among those now serving on Hindle's Dskate team is longtime Miltonian Monica Smith, a diabetes nurse educator who works with Type-1 children at Credit Valley Hospital in Mississauga.

With many of those young patients also a part of Dskate, Smith was quick to jump onboard — viewing the camp as an ideal opportunity to see the effects of her work in a real-life scenario.

"It's (camp) just fabulous, for the families as well as us (instructors). It creates a network and gives the kids confidence when they can see these pro athletes and know it's (competing with diabetes) a doable thing.

"And I love hockey, so it's very exciting."



Matthew Abramowicz, 9, takes part in one of the skating/stick handling drills at Dskate.



Rasmus Gustafsson of Sweden checks his blood sugar level.



Rasmus Gustafsson (left) and his fellow campers do some off-ice training with former Olympic rower Chris Jarvis.



Assistant coach Francis DeSrosier demonstrates a drill at Dskate camp.

