

# Summits Meeting

The Toronto Sun's commitment to hockey at all levels is evident once again with the Minor Hockey Beat series in *LEAFS NATION MAGAZINE*. Here's a profile on how a local team's European adventure provided a lifetime of memories.

BY RYAN WOLSTAT

If you thought the famed hockey rivalry between Canada and Russia fizzled long ago and that kids today don't know or care about the epic battles of the past, the Hillcrest Summits AA rep team might just convince you otherwise.

The plucky group of 12-year-olds, who play in the Greater Toronto Hockey League, took a trip to Europe to play in a tournament last December, cramming in eight games over seven days, along the way realizing that nothing gets the blood pumping in a Canadian hockey player like a game against Russia.

It all began back in Toronto where Summits coach Tony Altomare had been trying unsuccessfully for three years to put together a trip of this magnitude. Several GTHL teams travel overseas each year for tournaments and Altomare and the

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Hillcrest organization stepped up to allow this squad to go as well.

In all 45 – 16 players, as well as coaches, parents, siblings and GTHL executive director Scott Oakman and his wife Michelle – made the nine-hour flight to Milan, Italy.

They were immediately taken on a nearly five-hour bus ride to Zurich, Switzerland, where they played two exhibition games right off the bat. The Summits have been a pretty successful team this season. Altomare says they've hovered around second place for much of the year and the team didn't fail to impress at the Tournois Jean Tinguely, winning all of its games, including matches against French and Swiss teams, on the way to a championship meeting with the Moscow Penguins.

Altomare wasn't sure what to expect heading into the final game. He thought the boys would be excited simply because they had reached the ➤

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**A lifetime of memories**

finals of the tournament. What he didn't anticipate, was the recognition they had for what it meant to take on a Russian squad and the pride they felt when they were given special jerseys complete with a superimposed Canadian flag.

"The expression on the kids' faces was unbelievable," Altomare says. "As soon as they saw the jerseys, their mouths dropped."

Indeed, Anthony Filoso, a centre for the Summits, will never forget that moment.

"We were told by the coaches to wait outside because they had to 'clean' the dressing room," Filoso says. "When they called us in, we saw 'Team Canada' jerseys hanging on the wall. Each jersey had our hockey numbers and our last name across the back. This made us all feel very proud and happy."

Though many of the parents of these children were mere toddlers themselves during the famed Summit Series between Team Canada and the Soviet Union in 1972, most were taken back to that time when they watched these fittingly named Summits take on the Penguins.

"(The game) brought up Canada-Russia series memories for us older guys," Altomare says. "Parents were in the stands with tears in their eyes."

The significance was not lost on the players either.

Altomare's son Nello, a right-winger who scored a shootout goal to help Hillcrest beat a Swiss team in the tournament semifinals, says the final game resonated with him and his teammates.

"I will also always remember the feeling of pride

I felt wearing the Maple Leaf on my jersey," he recalls. "Knowing that there are not that many people that can say that they have played internationally, especially against the Russians, made me feel very special and very proud to be a Canadian hockey player."

The team came up short against Moscow, but according to coach Altomare he "couldn't care less whether they won or lost. They'll never forget that year because of that trip."

Altomare says he was surprised at the camaraderie and togetherness his team showed both on and off the ice throughout the voyage. For Oakman, who sees both the good and bad aspects of minor hockey on a daily basis, the experience was enlightening.

"It was refreshing to spend time with a group of people who are involved in hockey for all the right reasons," Oakman says. "(The team, parents and coaches) are the poster group for what minor hockey should be about."

Though many of the players had never even heard of '72 Summit stars such as Bobby Clarke or Valeri Kharlamov, they instinctively knew what throwing on a Canadian jersey meant.

"Hockey isn't just a game, it's an international event that brings pride and joy to your face," team captain Avery Rosen says. "It doesn't matter who you are or where you're from. I learned that the passion of the game brings you together as friends and in this case, it brings you together as a nation." ●

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