

Aboriginal hockey gets a boost

J.R. Rardon
Gazette sports

Alex Nelson simply wanted more first nations youths to have a chance to play hockey when he began to form the Port Hardy Aboriginal Development Team.

In less than two years, he's gotten more than he bargained for.

Thanks to a unique partnership with Marine Harvest, which pays for the group's ice time at Port Hardy Civic Centre, the second-year program has grown from a weekly practice session for boys 15 and older to twice-weekly sessions that include both boys and girls as young as four years old.

"I didn't expect that at all," said Nelson, who with his wife Ann secured the sponsorship deal with Marine Harvest in late 2006. "I thought we'd have maybe 20 kids, and I'd have been happy with 15. Now, I've got 34 when they all show up."

The development team showed its appreciation last month when it hosted Marine Harvest communications director Ian Roberts at an open house that featured hot dogs and drinks, prizes and raffles.

"There must have been 40 kids on the ice; I couldn't believe it," said Roberts. "The smiles on the kids' faces were great and I'll tell you honestly — this is rare when you sponsor groups and teams — I had the most kids come up and say, 'Thank you very much for sponsoring us'."

The team is coached by Alex Nelson and his son, T.J. Nelson, both certified coaches who have worked with Port Hardy Minor Hockey.

The lack of Native players in minors led Alex and his family to start the program, and it seems to have paid immediate dividends — the number of aboriginal players in Port Hardy Minor Hockey has jumped from 16 in the 2006-07 season to 34 currently.

"A lot of these kids are too intimidated to go into minor hockey," Alex Nelson said. "This really helps their self-esteem, and I know parents like what we're doing for their kids."

The program is designed not to compete with minor hockey for players, but to prepare them to enter the



Cody Walkus was one of the young skaters who attended last month's sponsor appreciation skate. Below, the Port Hardy Aboriginal Development Team poses on the ice.

Teresa Bird photo



minors.

"My husband tells them, 'This is your weekly hockey school. If you want to play games, you join minor hockey,'" Ann Nelson said.

The practice sessions, which Nelson said are modeled after minor hock-

District of Port Hardy, getting discounts on equipment from David Deans of North Star Cycle and Sports and securing additional donations of hockey equipment.

Getting Marine Harvest to fund the ice time was a major coup, and allowed the program. The aquaculture company, which has working agreements with several Vancouver Island first nations, regularly sponsors adult commercial teams, but this is the company's first foray into a youth development program.

"Without them, it would be impossible," Ann Nelson said. "You're looking at \$2,000 to \$4,000 a year they've been donating."

And Marine Harvest has already committed to funding a third season of the program in 2008-09.

"Alex kept in touch with us during last season and is doing so again this year," said Roberts. "It's not like he took the money and ran. The fact that he's kept in touch means I've already budgeted this for next year."

"I thought we'd have maybe 20 kids, and I'd have been happy with 15."

Alex Nelson

ey workouts, are held each Monday evening for boys aged 16-22 and Thursday afternoons for boys and girls up to 15 years old. It is open to youths in each of the three local bands, but nearly all of the players so far have come from Gwa'sala-Nakwaxda-xw.

Ann Nelson spearheaded the fundraising effort, securing insurance with support from Gord Wolden of the