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Young hockey players hit the ice, then the books

By INGRID PERITZ
From Saturday's Globe and Mail

A New Brunswick coach instills a love of reading in his team by making it cool

The Atom hockey practice at the Shediac arena takes players through their skating, shooting and stick-handling drills. But the coach saves his most popular training tip for last.

Standing in the locker room after practice, coach Shane Doiron delivers his instructions to the roomful of nine- and 10-year-old boys, who've unlaced their skates and packed up their gear.

"Now," he says, "we're going to do our reading."

The boys reach for books: The weekly Shediac Capitals reading circle is under way.

For three years, Mr. Doiron has parlayed his position as a hockey coach to instill a love of books among his grade-school charges. Driven by his own regrets at sidelining reading while he pursued a hockey career, he's trying to get his players to find inspiration between the covers of books as much as on the ice.

In doing so, he's using Canada's game to overcome boys' lagging reading scores.

"I spend hours and hours teaching them to skate and shoot pucks," the 36-year-old coach says. "This teaches them life. It's a gift."

Mr. Doiron's book club reaches to the heart of a critical problem in Canada. The literacy gap is growing between boys and girls, leaving boys trailing in the reading and writing skills they need for academic achievement.

The reading group in Shediac, a community outside Moncton on New Brunswick's east coast, tries to avoid the pitfalls associated with boys' disaffection for books.

Here, reading's not a girly thing. The adulated male coach is a reader. And the players are given a selection of books to choose from, almost all of them about hockey and adventures. A favourite this year is *Le Zamboni*, about a junior goalie who enters the belly of an ice-smoothing machine and its magical dream machine.

Mr. Doiron insists on recruiting fathers for the club, which unfolds in the chummy atmosphere of the post-practice dressing room. When the coach gives the signal, the 17 team members split off into groups of threes and fours and huddle on the benches with a volunteer dad. At this week's gathering, fathers leaned in to hear the boys' animated talk about their reading. Mr. Doiron led one group, kneeling on the floor before a clutch of rapt boys, who were going over the action in a book about the exploits of a gang of young adventurers on a deserted island. (Most of the books are in French, the language of the boys' schooling.)

Mr. Doiron asks the boys to spend about 20 minutes reading before bedtime. No one's punished for not doing it, but they're told they would be letting their teammates down.

"I tell them to finish the day with a good book," Mr. Doiron says. "I explain that reading is part of exercise. The more you exercise your brain the better you think on the ice. But it's not work, it's fun."

The recipe seems to work. Parents tell him their sons are picking up books unprompted, and their grades at school have improved.

"Sometimes my son will say to me, 'Dad, let's read, I've got to get my reading done,' " says Keith Allain, father of nine-year-old Samuel. "Before, reading for him was a chore. Now it's part of his routine. I'll see him grab a book."

The boys seem to be won over. Pausing in his gear before heading onto the ice, 10-year-old Jason Gallant says he's spending less time on his Xbox. "I read instead. When I'm bored I take a book."

Mr. Doiron's determination to put books in boys' hands took root in his own experience with hockey. He grew up in a small community near Shediac, where boys like him lived and breathed the game. Reading, he recalls, just "wasn't cool."

His skills as a defenceman catapulted him to the major juniors, but by age 19 the dream of an NHL career had faded. He enrolled in university. That's where, while trying to read a biology text for class, he realized his reading skills were too weak for him to keep up. "Here I was and I only knew one thing in life: hockey, and nothing else."

Mr. Doiron stuck with his studies and graduated with honours in civil-engineering technology. And when he became a minor-hockey coach, he decided he would help give his players the opportunities he'd missed.

"I didn't want them to be like I was at age 20. I wanted them to be able to make choices that I didn't have," says Mr. Doiron, a father of three who works for the federal government. "We have this great tool in Canada. It's called hockey. We have it in every small town and village in this country. There have been too many horror stories about hockey coaches. Stories of abuse. I want hockey to do good."

Mr. Doiron's mix of no-nonsense authority and big-hearted commitment to his players seem to be key. His words carry the kind of weight that parents might envy.

"A hockey coach is like a demigod," says Manon Jolicoeur, who wrote her master's thesis at the University of Moncton on the Shediac reading circle. "When he says something, he doesn't have to repeat it."

Ms. Jolicoeur found that even "disengaged" boys who were initially the least interested in books signed on for the coach's club. "Their parents didn't have to remind them, like they did for school. When the boys read for the book club, they read for themselves." She adds: "What's interesting is that all of them, without exception, said the same thing, 'On my next team, I'd like it if my coach asks me to read.'"

Each Monday, the preadolescent boys who file into the Shediac arena arrive with a freezer-sized Ziploc bag. It contains their book, a pencil and a notebook, in which they've jotted down notes or a drawing about that week's reading. It's become so entrenched that one boy, Félix LeBlanc, was sitting out the practice due to a knee injury this week but showed up clutching his Ziploc bag anyway.

That bag is, in many ways, a testament to Mr. Doiron's success. "At the end of the year, if I've developed 17 kids on the ice and off the ice, it's worth more than one championship. Because a championship is one day. Reading is for a lifetime."

Maybe he should make it his mantra: He Shoots. He Reads. He Scores.

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