

Sports

Flying Fathers meld faith, hockey for kids

BY Johnnie Bachusky, MVP Staff

INNISFAIL - Stefan Labrecque appeared calm and relaxed as he was about to face a thundering slap shot.

There was a tin can on his head destined to be violently knocked off from 20 feet away.

The shooter was a priest.

And he enthusiastically let go his blast.

The can fell harmlessly to Labrecque's feet.

Scores of school kids let out collective sighs and laughter.

Labrecque, principal of St. Marguerite Bourgeoys Catholic School, simply smiled.

"It was good for the kids.

It was fun," said Labrecque, noting with a wink the puck blast was totally safe. "Yes, it brought a lot of joy for the kids."

But the puck blast was just an interlude for an entertaining, and even moving hour-long educational presentation on Feb. 11 by a trio of committed Roman Catholic priests from the legendary Flying Fathers hockey team.

Founded in 1963 by Northern Ontario priests Brian McKee and Les Costello, the Flying Fathers began as a



Father Daniel Corso of the famed Flying Fathers hockey team blasts a slap shot to knock a can from the head of Stefan Labrecque, principal of Innisfail's St. Marguerite Bourgeoys Catholic School, during a well-received presentation on Feb. 11 to staff and students.

Johnnie Bachusky/MVP Staff

single charity event mission to raise money for a family to cover the medical expenses for a boy who had lost the use of one eye.

However, the team, whose style of play has always been more entertainment than hockey skill, became a phenomenon across North America; barnstorming under a motto of "praying and playing" to where ever there was a need to support a cause, and playing up to 1,000 games and raising

millions of dollars.

Over the years the Flying Fathers' entertainment has bordered on the zany, such as having referees giving penalties to opposing players for "acting like a Protestant", or having their backup goaltenders bringing out two horses named Patience and Penance who were mounted by goalie pad-clad clowns.

But all entertainment revolves around the great Canadian game of hockey,

and for a week this month the Flying Fathers are in Alberta to share their story with a delightful streak of humour and fun.

"We're here today to continue their legacy, not so much as a charity fundraiser this time but more of a ministry, evangelization, and promoting vocations of the priesthood," said 32-year-old Father Daniel Corso of St. Catherines, Ont., one of three members of the Flying Fathers offering a presentation to St. Marguerite staff and 300 students from kindergarten to Grade 9.

"We're definitely going to encourage the kids wherever God calls them to follow him with generous hearts," he said. "That's going to be our message today."

But the trio of priests, which also included Father Kris Schmidt, of Camrose, and Toronto's Father Matt McCarthy, also love the game of hockey.

"We've all been playing hockey from a young age and all of us play in in some capacity now as priests," said Corso. "We love the game and it's been a part of our lives, just like our faith has, for a long time.

"The fact we get to do both

those things together, tell people about Jesus but also play hockey, is just a real blessing," he added.

The presentations by the three priests were stories of faith and hockey. and how there was a deep connection for strength, perseverance and love.

It was followed by a question and answer segment for the kids, but it was so popular time soon ran out.

The following night the Flying Fathers were scheduled for a hockey game in Red Deer, one that included Father Curtis Berube, parish priest of Innisfail's Our Lady of Peace Catholic Church, and Red Deer Catholic Regional Schools communications coordinator Patrick Teskey and his sons Matt and Josh.

That would be followed with a trip to Edmonton for more presentations and hockey games.

"Their presentations were excellent," said Labrecque. "It's always nice to have young priests come in and talk about the vocation.

"As a Red Deer Catholic school division, we work really hard on in trying to bring faith to kids in authentic and meaningful ways."



Father Kris Schmidt of Camrose, a member of the Flying Fathers hockey team, hosts a question and answer segment for young St. Marguerite Bourgeoys Catholic School students during an hour-long presentation on Feb. 11.

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