

# Southern Knights Juniors 2007

Coaches: Blake Sinclair, Paavo Huhtinen

Managers: Dave Dunlop, Tracy Bennett

Upon knowing I had a small pool of juniors to choose from, let alone good ones, I was forced to ask a small group of midgets to attend the trials in Queenstown. Unfortunately a few of our best juniors decided not to represent Southern this year, which ended up meaning that the trials were practically a complete waste of time as almost everyone who trialled made the team to go to Nationals.

My plan of not scattering the trainings over the season, but instead having a week long camp just before Nationals wasn't the roaring success I would have liked. I put this down to two reasons, reason one being the poor timing of it (it ended up being held in the week leading up to Nationals, this meant the players were exhausted come game time, next year I would hold it in the winter school holidays for seven days). The second reason being the lack of the absolute basic skills of our so called "top players". Now I don't mean to be cynical but a good number of my team could not pass or skate well enough to even be at Nationals, let alone understand the set plays needed to stay in the game with Canterbury and Auckland. These players spent far too much time worrying about how good they could juggle a puck and how hard their shooting was instead of practicing the fundamentals of the game. I strongly believe there is an attitude in our hockey down south that as long as you can shoot a puck hard and juggle a puck on your stick then you are a good hockey player, which is completely and utterly wrong and our coaches at club level need to wake up to this and start teaching our players that it is skating and passing which create the backbone of every great player. I shouldn't have to, as coach of the Southern Juniors, spend 75% of my teams practice time focusing on skills that would be second nature to hockey players from anywhere else. As it was, we spent maybe four hours out of seventeen working on team plays, which was most definitely not enough.

Our team set plays and defence were based on the knowledge brought forward by former professional and my assistant coach Paavo Huhtinen of Finland. The defensive pattern was not a box like normal, rather a moving triangle with a man always in front of the net, this is a far more

aggressive play than the passive box we all know and love and if pulled off properly is a far better system of defending your goal because it gives you the option of forcing the opposition to make a mistake rather than waiting for one to happen.

The night before Nationals I had my team play the Dunedin Penguins Premier team, this game ended up being played in front of both the Auckland and Canterbury teams. It was a dismal defeat to say the least, it showed the serious flaws in my team, the areas which we would have worked on had we not had to work on the fundamentals. The score was 18-1, thanks to a brilliant piece of team work by Ryan O'Keefe and Phillip Bennett.

Come Nationals, we were comfortable in good looking hoodies sourced from Custom Print, hoodies that we were proud to wear and are proud to wear even away from hockey.

Before our first game, the team were down in spirits following the crushing defeat of the night before. This did give us one advantage, that of being completely underrated! We came out firing in the first period of that game and full credit to those boys for giving their all. Alas, the game was not ours and we were trounced. Our other 3 games were much the same. Our skating was too far behind that of our rivals, we couldn't skate with them for a period, let alone an entire game. Our passes were wild, those that weren't were rarely received in a manner to continue an attacking play or even start one. The opposition skated rings around my boys, continually finding holes in our defence, and no matter how hard they tried, and they tried their hardest, our guys just couldn't compete. I think we won 3 periods the entire weekend. To their credit, we did better than last year and I had a much bigger group of players who wanted to and believed they could compete than BJ did last year, for that I am grateful.

If we ever want to win Nationals at the junior level, and stay on the top in others, I believe we need to concentrate on skating and passing skills at club level. Every year I have been to Nationals there has been the vibe in the team that we are just there to be another team and not there to compete or ever win. It's like Nationals are a joke, and this is driving away our best players, making them choose to do something more profitable with their time. If we get rid of that attitude and get our players interested in wanting to be the fastest skater and the best passer, then and only then will we see a general improvement in the level of players

coming from our region and an optimistic view before and during Nationals.

I would like to thank four players who gave it their absolute best at all times right through Nationals, never giving up, always trying to get one up on the opposition. They are Ryan O'Keefe, who was easily one of the best two defensemen at Nationals; Phillip Bennett, who led by example every minute of every game; Cameron Frear, who played so hard and so well, was one of the standout players of the tournament, given recognition and praise from both coaches of our opposite teams for his determination. Lastly, Jaih Sneddon, the player who in my eyes was the best in my team. Despite playing for the midgets in every game before ours, he out skated and out played some of the best juniors in the country. Full credit to Jaih and whoever brought him up to be such an unrelentingly talented hockey player, possibly one day one of the New Zealand has ever produced.

Next year if I am given the opportunity to coach this wonderful group of young men, I will do things a little differently. I now know what we need to do to compete. Hopefully the club coaches will listen to what I have said and try to bring about a change in attitude amongst our players and come practice time for Nationals we can use our warm up time to concentrate on the basics, not our practice time, do this and I guarantee we will see, every year, a much improved result.

Blake Sinclair - Head Coach