



Hockey helps Warner school survive

Nearly eight years ago, the town of Warner was faced with a problem: there was a declining population in both community and school. Hoping to solve this crisis, a few creative minds came together and proposed a program that has proved effective in saving the community's way of life.

Warner Hockey School (WHS), operational since 2003, is a K-12 institution, with a specialty high-performance, girls' hockey program that caters to students in grades 9 to 11. The idea became solidified in 2001 when the school struck a partnership with Horizon School Division, Warner School, the County of Warner, as well as the community. In 2003, WHS hired Jamie Wood as inaugural coach and billeted 22 athletes in the community.

"The motivation was definitely due to falling enrollment," says principal Mark Lowe. "If nothing was done, the high school was to be likely shut down."

A few years later, the school purchased a former LDS church, completed \$400,000 of renovations, and, in September 2005, became home to 23 female athletes and residence manager.

"We believed this would be an excellent opportunity for our school," says Lowe. "The result of renovating the space into a residence building has proven beneficial for both staff and students."

Lowe notes there are students who come from as far away as Finland, Sweden, and the United States, but most are from Alberta. The initiative has been a huge factor in bringing the community together.

Recently WHS has also completed a \$500,000 upgrade to an unused portion of their hockey area in order to increase usage. This includes an athletic centre equipped with ellipticals, bikes, treadmills and more.

"Failure was not an option as the potential life of our community depended on our success," he says. "We also had all the partners on the same page and united in focus."

The program involves athletes attending regular classes, on-ice experience six days a week, off-ice activities and more.

The community has logged 26,000 volunteer hours to date to keep the project viable, but, Lowe acknowledges research has been started to achieve continued sustainability.

Did you know:

- Warner is located approximately 65km south of Lethbridge on the way to the Coutts Sweetgrass border crossing when traveling on Highway #4.
- Warner Hockey School is for females 13 to 18 years old and offers a four-to-one practice to game ratio.
- Players receive 7.5 hours of on-ice training and competition every week.
- All 23 players reside at the Rome Meisser Center in Warner.
- Warner made the final five in the 2007 edition of the CBC Sports reality show, Kraft Hockeyville, which showcases Canadian communities that love this sport.

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