

Firebirds Host Families

BY BILL KHAN



Ron and Patricia O'Neil of Grand Blanc weren't hockey fans. "We didn't know anything about hockey," Ron said. "I'd never even watched it on TV or anything." That would quickly change in 2015 when the Flint Firebirds came to town.

The O'Neils would become immersed in the sport, when — at the urging of some friends who work for the team — they chose to house two Firebirds players last season, Jacob Collins and Will Bitten.

The 16- to 20-year-old players in the Ontario Hockey League spend the season with a host family, who create a home away from home. Host families — or billets, as they're called in Canada — provide a stable, secure environment for players who are often away from home for the first time while pursuing their hockey dreams.

It can be a rewarding experience for players and families alike.

"Being able to get to know them, then watch them on the ice, that's the coolest part," said Ron, whose sports background was in soccer and golf. "I don't think if I'd never met a hockey player and gotten to know a player like Jacob that I'd ever have followed the game. Because of him, I follow it more and root for his team; that makes it nice."

Collins is the only player the O'Neils are hosting this year. Having already hosted him for a year, there was a familiarity. They already knew, for instance, that pasta and chicken are his favorite pre-game foods.

"When Jacob's around the house, he's a lot of fun," Ron said. "We have a lot of games — pool and ping pong — and it's very competitive. When it comes to his training and skating, you can tell he's focused and there's no missing it."

Unlike the O'Neils, the Reys were a hockey family before the Firebirds arrived. That was part of the attraction for becoming a host family.

The son of Michael and Gretchen Rey, Parker is a sophomore on the Flint Powers Catholic hockey team. He played AAA-level hockey before joining the Chargers this season.

"We've got a young son who is 16 and looking to do that, as well, playing hockey at that level," Michael Rey said. "We thought, what the heck — we'll bring a player into our home so he can see what it takes to get to the next level."

The Reys hosted one of the Firebirds' top players last season: forward, Nicholas Caamano. This year, they're hosting Caamano and forward, Dane Johnstone.

Having OHL players in their home is having the desired influence on their son.

"He's seen the work ethic they have, understands the weight program, understands diet a little bit more," Michael said. "He just gets it all. When you're hanging around these guys, you can't help but be a sponge and



absorb it all. They're great role models, especially with Nick being drafted in the NHL. He's even seen the difference in Nick and the size he's gotten in a year. He's huge compared to the first year we had him in the house. Parker sees all that."

Billet families often share in the success of the players they host. Patricia Rey and her two kids went to Ancaster, Ontario last summer to attend a draft celebration party held by the Caamano family.

"It's fun to be part of the whole process," Michael said. "My daughter got to wear Nick's draft jersey and take a picture with him. It's all part of the draft experience."

The Reys added Johnstone this season after getting to know him last winter.

"Both Nick and Dane had concussions at the same time last year and were sitting out a while," Michael said. "They were sitting in the basement of my house and bonding. We liked Dane, and decided to have two players this year."

The right billet family can take away a lot of the stress of being away



from home for young players trying to impress NHL teams during a pivotal time in their hockey careers.

"Every day isn't going to go your way," said Firebirds forward, Kole Sherwood, an Ohio native who lives with the Francis family. "It's important to always have a place that's safe to go home, to regroup, to vent to someone. They're really cool. They have three kids and a great mom and dad who have been instrumental in the process."

Anyone interested in hosting a Firebirds player can apply at flintfirebirds.com/family. ♦

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