

Express stars suit up for OHL Development Combine



By Jake Courtepatte

Of the 96 young hockey players to take the ice at General Motors Centre in Oshawa over the weekend, three were looking to prove the York Simcoe Express breeds major junior talent.

Carter Robertson and Mathew MacDougall were joined by goaltender Pierce Charleson at the seventh annual OHL Development Combine, a grueling three-day test for players entering their OHL draft year.

Off-ice testing results from this weekend's combine will be distributed to all OHL general managers to assist in their evaluation of players heading into the draft. In addition to off-ice testing, the combine held seminars on vision, mental performance, nutrition and training.

Players also competed in a series of 4-on-4 games, joined behind the bench by special guest coaches that included CHL grads and ex-NHLers Wayne Primeau, Paul Ranger, and Darcy Tucker.

Last year's combine featured six players chosen in the first round of the OHL Priority Draft. Joining the Express players were elite athletes from AAA programs across Ontario, including four members of the Toronto Marlboros, who the Express recently beat in overtime at the OHL Cup, Minor Midget's top prize.

The numbers, as well as the accolades, are certainly there to place the Express players among the elite in their age group.

The 16-year old Charleson has spent the last seven seasons in the AAA Express program, winning three Silver Sticks, 4 OMHA championships, and the OHL Cup in that time.

"The combine was tough because I was competing and trying to do my best up against the elite players of my age group," said Charleson, who called it a "great experience" and that he was "glad to get the chance to go."

Charleson's numbers between the pipes were some of the best at his age level this season, sporting an impressive 28-6-3 record to go along with a 1.65 goals-against-average and a .916 save percentage. He credits his success with his use of his technical abilities in net.

"One of the best skills I could bring to an OHL team would be staying calm in the net," said Charleson.

MacDougall, a forward with the Express, has been with Charleson along for the ride through the team's success. After eight years in the Express program, he said he has never experienced anything like the combine.

"The combine was very physically and mentally demanding," said MacDougall. "Walking into the rink to see the testing area with everyone watching was intimidating. I wasn't sure whether it would be easy or hard but I saw quick that everything required the best effort if you wanted to be top on the leader board."

MacDougall sees himself as a two-way forward, one that can create offence but places the most importance on the defensive zone. Offensively, however, his speed to blow around defenceman should be what gives him an edge on the competition.

Robertson, a 6'1" defenceman with the Express, can bring a heavy shot to the OHL. On top of his 53 assists on the year, the blueliner added 25 goals. He says, however, it is his vision and his skating abilities that could set him apart.

"I feel I can see everything that is developing throughout the game," said Robertson, who added he "had fun" at the combine. "I feel with my skating I can get away from players and that is the difference in making a good play or not."

The OHL Priority Draft is set for this Saturday, where 301 players will be taken over 15 rounds to join the major junior ranks.