

PRO-TIPS

SPORTS CORP.

As seen in the London Free Press

A VENTURE THAT FILLS A VACUUM FOR HOCKEY PARENTS

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It was during a drive home to London from a Toronto Maple Leafs game that the idea began to crystallize in Brian Semkowski's mind. He has taken his son to a hockey camp. He has gone to a fantasy camp himself. He loves hockey. But as his friend John Bell spoke, it became clear there was a vacuum in the presentation of the complete hockey picture -- about what's out there for the child and his parents. Pro Tips was born -- well, conceived, anyway.

The plan is to merge the actual training of players with courses of action they and their parents will be able to pursue without flying blind as they plot the future.

"What we want to become is the trusted adviser, someone who can point them in the right direction," says Semkowski of a program that will get underway next July at Western Fair Sports Centre rinks.

You'd think a venture such as this would be somewhat low-end for a guy who became a multimillionaire in the computer industry. Actually, it's the fusion of business acumen and a passion for the game. How many other people have an artificial rink complete with boards and a Zamboni at their residence? This guy is really into it. But more on that in a minute.

Pro Tips is a business, Semkowski makes clear. But there's a deep love of sport running through it. Basically, the idea is to run on the Western Fair double pads three weeks with sessions for regular and elite players, male and female. Former London Diamond, Ohio State and Swedish League player Andy Forcey heads it up and will employ the men's and women's hockey coaches from such Ivy League schools as Ohio State, Bowling Green, Cornell and Providence.

It will be about teaching hockey skills, but it also will involve outlining the big picture of hockey -- so the player and parents can make sound decisions for the future.

"Parents are being asked to make informed decisions without any" solid information," Semkowski explains. "John Bell was in Ottawa and had 48 hours to make a decision on whether Mark, who is now with Chicago Blackhawks, should play tier 2, go to Michigan State or sign with the Ottawa 67's. It was a situation that left him wondering who to talk to and what would be the right decision."

Semkowski has made some pretty good decisions along the way himself. He is president of Southwest Sun Inc., a computer industry-driven operation that uses its expertise in other diverse forms of commerce. Golf course ownership in the form of the giant ClubLink, the Ottawa Renegades of the CFL and the Toronto Rock of the National Lacrosse League are some of the sports properties.

Pro Tips, you'll notice, does not include the word hockey. That's because plans are to expand into other sports. Semkowski and Southwest Sun partners Randy Gillies, Rick Baker and Paul Atkinson founded Solect Technology Group, a billing and customer care software operation used by phone carriers and Internet service providers to administer their Internet access businesses. They sold to an Israeli company named Amdocs three years ago for \$1.1 billion US. Southwest Sun now is more of an investment operation.

"Our business model is to find entities and people and invest in them," Semkowski says. "We provide the business acumen to get a company up and rolling. We're pretty much a holding company."

He says that in many respects, the most fascinating investment he ever made was on his home rink. It measures 45 feet by 90 feet and since it's outdoors, he's pleased he just got delivery this week of his "Zamboni." Actually, it's a John Deere tractor outfitted with a snow-blower, scraper and flooder with a 45-gallon tank for hot water.



"(Ex-Leaf) Wendel Clark just put a rink in at his home in Aurora," Semkowski said.

"I played golf with him last summer and he wanted to know all about ours."

Last year, Semkowski participated in a fantasy camp involving the likes of Wayne Gretzky, Paul Coffey, Glenn Anderson and the Courtnall brothers, Russ and Geoff. He was struck by how the common denominator hockey brought everyone together as friends. The investment aspect of hockey falls away fast when the former Montcalm high school player talks about his rink in what are almost Field of Dreams tones.

"I have to say it's one of the best investments I ever made. The pure enjoyment of it for my wife, my kids and their friends, myself and my friends is wonderful. My friends and I play three-on-three hockey, nine skaters and two goaltenders, in 10-minute games.

"Just to see the smiles on adult faces as they come off (to his heated garage to change). . . . For guys our age, it's fantastic. And it's as competitive as all get-out."

Interjected Forcey: "I just make sure (former Edmonton Eskimo fullback) Blake Marshall is on my team."

Cost of the July camp will be about \$300 for the general school, 10 or 15 per cent more for the elite school.

"What we want to do is determine what is appropriate for the kid at this particular time," Semkowski says.

"I hope my son and all kids get from hockey what I did. My best friends today are guys I grew up with and played hockey with. I'm having as much fun today as I did when I was eight years old.

"I love the game. I hope kids can get that, too. There's so much pressure nowadays, I think some kids lose the passion for the game and what it can teach you outside of hockey. As the business grows, we hope to teach the kids there are more and more opportunities."

Semkowski also commented on how thrilled he would have been had he been able to experience the high-level college hockey and European pro game Forcey has.

"Getting paid to do something you enjoy."

Chances are, come July, he will.

2 photos by Derek Ruttan, The London Free Press

1. TOP TALENT: Brian Semkowski, right, and Andy Forcey will employ hockey coaches from such Ivy League schools as Ohio State, Bowling Green, Cornell and Providence for their venture.
2. PRIDE AND JOY: Brian Semkowski, right, shown with Andy Forcey on Semkowski's backyard rink, says that in many respects, the most fascinating investment he ever made was on his home rink.