

Kudos for that OTHER football factory

With a focus on education, Sherwood Park Rams have racked up an amazing record of success the past 10 years

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Sherwood Park Rams coach Jim Skitsko, centre, celebrates another winning season with some of his players at their recent awards banquet. Shown are team captains, front row from left, Donavin Obenauer, Taylor Souster and Kael Schryver and back row from left, Tyler Nelson, Kyle Brow and Joel Seutter.

LARRY WONG, THE JOURNAL

It's the little football factory that could. The Sherwood Park Rams clubhouse proudly displays the spoils of their recent successes. Shiny trophies rest on top of a glass showcase and glossy banners hang high from the ceiling, sure to capture the imaginations of the 13-to-15-year-olds in the locker-room.

They'll soon raise another after seizing their third straight provincial bantam football championship on Nov. 20. And the impact of their former players is seen in the success of teams at the local high school and junior football levels.

But the program isn't content with just the on-field accolades. It's like one big parent hoping to one day shuffle all its kids off to college.

The Rams standing firmly find their motto: *Football is fun. Education is forever.* To back the pronouncement, they've organized a golf fundraiser the past five years with all proceeds put into bursaries for players pursuing further education.

"We're trying to build winners in life, not just football," said head coach Jim Skitsko, a provincial court judge.

"(Education) is something people can't take away from you. It'll open doors for you."

The desire to put the focus on education comes from Skitsko's father. He planted the college message early and often in his son and it stuck. Now the team passes the advice to its players.

"Education is a big part of the Rams organization," said Jesse Kuczera, a 14-year-old placekicker and defensive back. "You have to have good grades to play."

It's a small world for the players where school results have direct consequences on the football field, drawing a correlation between education and life outside the classroom.

Any school suspensions are matched and upheld on the football field. Report cards are fair game to the coaches and have to be brought to their attention. Good grades are rewarded and bring the kind of praise from the staff that gets Kuczera "pumped."

Coaches also have to abide by rules of no smoking, chewing tobacco and swearing around the kids, in an attempt to be better role models. That comes from a survey which noted more than 90 per cent of people reflect on a coach being a role model in their lives, said Skitsko.

"And wouldn't you know it, the kids stopped swearing altogether," he added.

One parent went as far as saying the kids would "run through a wall" for their coach. All of them. As a team.

A number of former players drop by to see how they can help give back to the program. Several recently won the Canadian Bowl with the Edmonton Huskies and brought the trophy into the Rams clubhouse to show the kids and talk about achieving their goals.

"The kids' eyes were as big as saucers," said Skitsko. "You could see that's what they wanted."

Even Edmonton Eskimos quarterback Jason Maas stopped by just days after coming off the bench to lead his team to a playoff victory over Calgary. He gave them a pep talk heading into their own championship game, which they won 31-0 over the Calgary Bulldogs.

"It was really exciting," said Kuczera about winning it all in his first year of

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football. "It was such a buzz and everybody was screaming. I've never felt so good inside before."

It's one more banner to go to the ceiling and one more shot of instant credibility to any message Skitsko relays. The Rams had a combined two wins in the two seasons before he joined in 1996 and had never won the provincials.

They've captured seven city titles and five provincial ones since. The team also

heads into next year guarding a 38-game winning streak.

All of this under a coach who never played even the high school level of the game because his parents moved out to a farm. But Skitsko says he surrounds himself with strong coaches who take care of their individual units.

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Skitsko hopes a number of his players go on to higher levels in football, which he calls a "great character builder." But it really doesn't matter if they play another down in their lives.

"Long after you forget about the Xs and Os, you're going to remember your experiences here and being the best you can be," he said.

He believes that effort should extend to the classroom and other areas of life. That's why perhaps his proudest number accomplishment is 29—the amount of players, and counting, who've received bursaries from the team.

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