
Stunning Successes For Jonas Samson Teams

December 11, 2011

The Cross Country Team

They got back into the van and returned to Meadow Lake, unaware that they'd just won a Provincial Team gold medal in Cross Country running, in the 2A classification. Team scores are obtained by adding the finishes of the best 4 runners. It's like golf: the lower your score, the higher you place. Unlike golf, a pleasant and sometimes mildly frustrating game, cross-country running is a brutal, lonely pastime with a lot of pain and a few intrinsic rewards.

Coaches Avril Skolney and Chelsea Seymour of Jonas Samson School were only allowed to take grade 9 runners. The 5 girls and 4 boys had travelled to Prince Albert the previous evening and driven to Middle Lake, the site of the Provincial Competition on the Saturday morning. The course was fast – an essentially flat path that wound through forest beside a lake, 3 km for the midget girls and 4 km for the midget boys. The top four placements were Taiya Paylor, (9th) and Emily Wilson, (16th) out of 94 runners (Midget Girls), and Brodie Derocher (19th) and Adam Merasty (26th) out of 97 runners (Midget Boys).

Taiya's run was remarkable in that she was able to move up from 15th to 9th place in the last two hundred metres, a sprint that undoubtedly clinched the team's gold medal. Brodie's run was equally remarkable in that he had just returned to the sport, unable to train because of a hip injury that caused him to miss most of the season.

In previous meets during the season the team had swept the Districts, placing 1st, 2nd and 5th in midget Boys, and 1st and 2nd in Midget Girls.

The Volleyball Team

Coach and vice-principal Chris Ellis of Jonas Samson School took his Jr. Boys volleyball team to four tournaments at the start of the year. Jr. tournaments, like Jr. teams, are for students in grades 7, 8 and 9 –students who are, on average, thirteen and fourteen years old. The team did very well, losing only 3 games, 1 of which was to a grade 9 / 10 team. Having experienced a lot of success, and having trained his boys to play with the net always at the height for senior boys (yes, they kind of wondered about that), he took them to play a few games against senior teams. Games against kids in grades 11 and 12, kids who were seventeen and eighteen years old, and they won.

So, without a second thought, Coach Ellis decided to see if he could take his junior high team and enter the high school Provincial Championships competition. After contacting the sports body that governs these things he discovered that he could. The only problems were that he could only take his 7 grade 9 players (picture one lonely sub sitting on the bench), and he had to enter the 4A category, the one reserved for schools just under the size of the large city high schools.

“We were pretty surprised when he told us we were going to enter provincials,” said player Brodie Derocher, “because we’re a bunch of 14 year olds and we’d be playing against grade 11 and 12 kids.”

At the North Regional Championship held at La Loche the young men from Jonas Samson, - Brodie Derocher, Diehl Normand, Blake Prete, Aaron Varjassy, Garret Cheze, Jayden Brander and Brendan Sauer- found themselves in a pool with Biggar and Unity. In their first game against Biggar they were outplayed badly, losing 25 -8. Then, to quote the game notes posted by the tournament organizers, “During the second set, Aaron Varjassy led the team with amazing attacks to beat Biggar 25-17. The third and final set seemed over when Biggar led 24-16. With *consistent serving, awesome court movement, blocking and attacking as well as teamwork*, Jonas Samson earned 10 points in a row to defeat Biggar 26-24.”

Let’s take a step back here, and reflect that these are 13 and 14 year olds (remember the one lonely sub?) playing 17 and 18 year olds. They’re little guys playing men –they have to reach up to shake hands after the match. Or get a stool to stand on. And they’re not just winning games, they’re coming back from 8 point deficits, with the opposition only 1 point away from victory, to win.

“After the first game in regionals we realized we were playing at the same level as the high schools,” said player Blake Prete. “We’d thought that size would be more of a factor, but we nullified it with passing, by playing good defence, and by playing smart.”

“They were just vibrating after the game,” said Ellis. “ I mean literally vibrating. So badly that they couldn’t text-message the results ‘cause their hands were shaking so much.”

The next morning they played Unity and posted two 25-20 victories to win their pool. They played Île à la Crosse in the semis, losing 25-18 and 25-17 against a big, hard-hitting team. As a result they had to play Biggar again to see who would obtain the third spot to qualify for the Provincial Championship.

They lost the first game 25-23. They won the second 27-25, and in the third, to quote the official notes, “Jonas Samson rattled off the first 7 points and never looked back handing Biggar a 25-7 loss. The victory gave Jonas Samson a spot in the provincials.”

The top ten Senior Boys teams in the province met in Wilkie for the Provincial Championships. Jonas Samson’s first match was against a strong team from Caronport (who would go on to win the pool 4-0, and finish with a silver medal). Both teams started off neck and neck but Caronport pulled away midway through the first set to win. The second game was closer, but ended in a loss as well.

The second match, against Yorkton, was, in the words of Coach Ellis, “ the probable turning point for the weekend.” As the game notes indicate: “Jonas Samson took the early lead at 12 to 7 which forced Yorkton to take a timeout. Still Jonas Samson continued to push forward in control of the lead with the help of consistent hitting and solid blocking. Finally the Stingers closed out Yorkton 25 to 22.”

Yorkton. The team that made the bronze medal match and finished 4th overall.

The notes continue: “The start of the second frame was a real seesaw battle. Jonas Samson called time out to settle down the guys when the score was 17 to 12 after a big run by Yorkton. Despite a solid comeback, Yorkton won the 2nd set 28 to 26. The early momentum was with Yorkton in the third set thanks to a punishing hit *that may well have hurt the floor*. Despite a valiant effort Yorkton proved to be too much to handle winning the third set 25 to 21.”

The boys from Jonas go on to lose two very close matches to Nipawin and Wilkie. They fail to make the quarterfinals.

But this was no failure. This was a magnificent achievement.

How does this happen? These two stories are just two instances of some of the remarkable successes experienced academically and athletically within the school division. Ten volleyball teams from the Northwest, for example, made it to the Provincial Championship Volleyball tournaments this season alone.

“They were a great bunch of guys to coach,” said Ellis. “They’d do anything you’d ask them to do. By way of an example, I tell this one fellow ‘you’ve got to move up right there on the attack line. Two seconds later he takes a huge hit right on the chin. Like BOOM! He turns to me and he says ‘Is that where you wanted me to stand?’ I say yes and he gets right back in there again. Those are the kind of boys we have.”

“Practice did it too,” said Derocher. “Practice and excellent coaching. If we do something wrong coach helps fix it. Then we practice to perfection.”

When asked for his opinion on the reasons for the unprecedented success of a middle school in high school provincial competitions principal Jim Snodgrass was clear and succinct. “The level of coaching in our school and in our community is really impressive. Our teachers put in 5000 hours of extra-curricular work each year – those hours translate into a lot of hard work and commitment and sacrifice on the part of the coaches and athletes. With regard to our students there’s a real tradition of extra- curricular involvement in Meadow Lake, whether it’s in drama or sports or in other activities. Both the S.C.C. and our school board have been very supportive over the years in the pursuit of enhancing student experience and encouraging excellence. Our S.C.C. puts money aside every month to help kids to participate, and that’s opening a lot of doors for students. The board has created an excellence fund for provincials, they’ve created a budget for schools for special events like extra-curr and field trips, and they have supported the hiring of great talent for the division. They are genuinely concerned about students and staff. Each of these factors played a part in the success of our teams.”



L-R, are: Back Row: Garret Cheze, Jayden Brander, Brett Esau Gr. 8), Diehl Normand, Brendan Sauer, Front Row: Jayden Trimble-Brander (Gr. 8), Blake Prete, Aaron Varjassy, Brodie Derocher

Photo by Carrie Arlett