

# Roger Neilson remembered for his love of Israel

By ELI RUBENSTEIN



Friday, 27 June 2003

Roger Neilson (center) at hockey camp in Israel.

Last week Canadian newspapers were filled with testimonials to Roger Neilson. The celebrated hockey coach passed away at age 69 after heroically battling cancer for more than three years.

Few people were aware of another side to Neilson. He loved Israel and Israelis, and he expressed that love with a passion most Jews would do well to emulate.

In 1997, with the help of Marshall Starkman, Jeff Budd, Rachel Lasry and many others, the first Roger Neilson Hockey Camp in Israel was launched at Canada Centre in Metulla, a town on Israel's northern border.

Supervised by Neilson, as well as a number of other NHL players and staff, the camp ran from 1997 to 2000 and was attended by an estimated 400 Canadian and Israeli youth.

The camp was sponsored by UIA Federations Canada, Canada Israel Experience and Roots Canada and supported by other generous organizations and individuals.

But no one was more important to the success of the camp than Neilson.

“Roger always had a love for Israel,” commented long time friend and camp volunteer Paul Bedford. “He was a great history buff and admired the perseverance of Israel, who were the underdogs in his view.”

Neilson’s love of Israel also translated into love for the Israeli teens he coached.

“Roger loved the kids,” observed Starkman. “He loved their rough and tumble attitude, their work ethic, and he just loved their personalities.

“And the kids loved him too,” he continued, “because he was so down to earth, because he wanted to know each and every one of them.”

One moment will always remain with Starkman. “When Roger returned to the camp after the first year, the moment the kids heard Roger was in the dressing room they charged off the ice, tossed aside their helmets, sticks and gloves and bounced across the concrete with their skates still on. As soon as they reached Roger they jumped on him and circled him with hugs – and, of course, Roger returned all their hugs.”

So taken was Roger by his Israeli charges, he committed to sponsoring two Israelis to attend his hockey camp in Lindsay, Ont., every summer.

Lasry and I visited the Israelis one summer at Neilson’s home on the shores of Chemong Lake in Peterborough, Ont.. The first thing we noticed was the constant stream of young people coming in and out of the house.

“Roger’s doors were never locked – they were always open to guests, and there were always extra bathing suits for those who wanted to swim,” remembered Starkman. “His enjoyment came from knowing that others were enjoying his home. He only worried about one thing: how many kids were staying for dinner.”

Inside Neilson’s home, Rachel and I noticed a photo of the former president of Israel shaking hands with him in Metulla. Ezer Weizman was visiting Metulla after yet another round of Katyusha rockets launched from Lebanon had landed on Israel’s northern towns. Neilson came out to greet the president looking like a kibbutznik – barefoot and wearing his customary shorts and baseball hat. The president remarked that Neilson was already half Israeli.

Lasry, the Canadian staff person for three of the camp’s four year’s in existence, recalled Neilson’s dedication to the program.

“It was an honour for the Canadian Jewish community to have had someone of Neilson’s stature devote himself to the youth of Israel,” she noted. “I don’t know many people, Jewish or otherwise, who would volunteer to return to Israel every summer and devote their passion to Israeli youth.

“Roger really changed people through the sport. He knew the passion, the self confidence and the hard work on the ice would also help the young people off the ice. And his influence continued outside the arena, during their hikes in Israel and in handling any discipline issues on the trip,” Lasry added.

On one of those hikes, Neilson even expressed a sense of humour about his battle with cancer, recalls Lisi Tesher, a staff person on the 2000 program.

“We were hiking up Masada and the guide told the [shirtless] guys to watch their backs. He said, ‘You could get cancer. Be careful!’ And Roger replied: ‘I already have cancer. I’ve got nothing to worry about!’” Tesher said.

“I was driving in my car the other day,” said Jeff Budd, one of the camp’s co-founders. “And I started thinking... I come from a small town, Kitchener, Ont., and yet I had the honour and privilege to work with Roger, to sit on the same bench with him, to watch him work his magic with the Israeli kids. And I started remembering all these stories about my time with Roger and then I just broke down and cried for a long time.

“I am so sorry he is gone.”

So are we all.

*(Eli Rubenstein, an employee of UIA Federations Canada, worked with Roger Neilson at his hockey camp in Israel from 1997- 2000.)*

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27 Jun 2003 –