

Ringette coach eyeing nationals

by TED CLARKE
Citizen staff

Four years ago, when Mark Bertulli was coaching ringette, his junior team capped its season by playing in a national championship.

Now, as head coach of the Prince George belles, Bertulli is well aware the path to the national tournament is not so cut and dried for his team of 16-18-year-olds. Unlike 2000, when Prince George hosted the national playoffs, there's no automatic berth and his team will have to earn its right to play for a Canadian title.

A national berth is actually far from the minds of the Prince George belles, who until this season, were too few in numbers to even form a team. Interest in ringette among the older players in the Prince George Ringette Association tailed off following the 2000 tournament, but this season, 10 players have signed up, including Bertulli's daughter Andrea, and that convinced Mark to return to a sport he loves.

"When I started out, I was just a parent who wanted to get involved and I'm probably like any other coach you'd talk to," Mark Bertulli said. "If I didn't want to do it, I wouldn't have done it."

He'll have his team in action at the Joy Hoffman Memorial Tournament, starting today at the Kin Centre and Coliseum.

Bertulli's teams have met with their share of success over the years, including two provincial gold medals, but that wasn't the only reason he came back to coaching.

"That's not the deciding factor at the end of the day, it's about participating with my daughter," he said. "Andrea wanted to play. This her last year of eligibility in minor ringette. These girls are all wonderful girls and I really enjoy it."

Although small in numbers, the Prince George belles are long in experience. Most of the players started playing when they were young girls. The difficult part for coach Bertulli has been getting them all out for practice at the same time.

"We have seven girls, on average, who show up for practice, so it's been kind of tough," he said.

"But we've got a goalie and all the positions covered, so on paper it looks good. It's A-calibre for sure. The girls have played a lot of years here in town and that will be the main reason we'll do fairly well. I'm pretty confident once we get going we'll be a pretty good team. Most of the girls have come up through the ranks. Andrea is the only one who's coming back after a couple years off."

In goal, the belles will lean to Wendy Potskin, the multitalented athlete whose skills as a softball pitcher will no doubt come in handy when it comes to blocking rings. Potskin was Bertulli's junior goalie in 2001 when they won the provincial B championship.

Other members of the team are Heather Bethune, Joleena Castle, Nicole Crandell, Bailey Dobson, Jodi Gandy, Gillian Missellbrook, Kaleena Ross, Britney Hannon, and Andrea Bertulli.

Two other players, Kate McCrae and Amber Reimer of Quesnel, will possibly join the team in January if their course loads at the College of New Caledonia will allow it.

"I'm looking forward to the new year and if we get our whole team together, it's looking like a good team," Mark Bertulli said.

The Prince George belles have applied to be part of tournaments in Kelowna, Calgary and Sherwood Park and they'll be part of the double-A provincial championship in Quesnel.