

## Local duo wins U18 hockey gold

By Herb Garbutt  
OAKVILLE BEAVER STAFF

Nicole Paniccia had twice played in the national girls' hockey championships, but she had never felt pressure like she did in the opening game of this year's tournament in Surrey, B.C.

In previous years, Paniccia had suited up for Ontario Blue, the province's second entry in the under-18 nationals. Now guarding the net for Ontario Red, Paniccia found herself playing her provincial rivals.

"I was really nervous at the beginning," said the Appleby College student, "because we're expected to beat them."

Paniccia didn't have to wait long to settle her nerves. Teammate Hannah Armstrong scored just five seconds after the opening faceoff and Ontario Red went on to a 4-1 victory.

Four days later, Ontario Red would face their counterparts again in the championship game and once more come away with a 5-1 victory to win the gold medal, a first for Paniccia and the second straight championship for Oakville's Hayleigh Cudmore.

Cudmore, who was just happy to make the team last season, found herself in a much different situation this year.

"(The coaches) relied on me for a lot more," the 17-year-old blueliner said. "I could help some of the girls who hadn't been in the final before."

Cudmore and Paniccia were significant parts of the Ontario Red defence that allowed just seven goals in five tournament games. Paniccia won all three of her starts, posting a 1.67 goals-against average and a .941 save percentage, while Cudmore had one assist in five games.

Paniccia was well aware of Ontario Blue's desire to beat the Red team. And it was another familiar opponent



Nicole Paniccia

that prevented her from recording a shutout in a 2-1 win over Atlantic Canada. The lone goal came off the stick of Jillian Saulnier. The Halifax native not only attends Appleby with Paniccia, she lives with her classmate during the school year.

"We shared some words after she scored on me," Paniccia said, "but it was all just kidding."

Though the team was made up of players from 11 different teams — Cudmore plays for the Oakville Ice and Paniccia with the Toronto Aeros of the Provincial Women's Hockey League — both said the team bonded quickly, essential when playing five times in as many days.

"It was an unbelievable team," Paniccia said. "We had a lot of talented players and you might expect everyone to play like individuals but we really came together."

The team outscored its opponents 10-3 in the round robin and took a 4-0 lead into the final period of the semifinal against Manitoba. That's when the team faced its first adversity of the tournament.

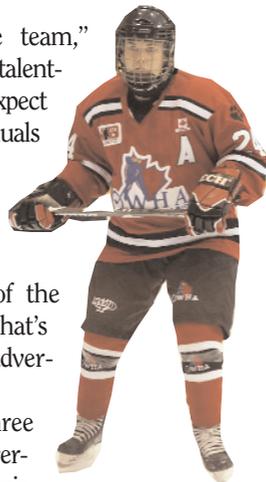
Manitoba rallied for three goals, two of them on the power-play, in 12 minutes. But Paniccia did not allow them to tie the game in the final minutes.

"We just lapsed for 10 or 15 minutes," Cudmore said. "We had to go through some adversity. We just did it all at once, but we pushed through it."

It would prove to be a valuable lesson, though. Ontario Red built a 3-0 lead in the final and took a two-goal advantage into the third.

"If we hadn't had such a tough semi, we might have sat on the lead," Cudmore said. "But after the Manitoba game, we kept our foot on the gas pedal."

The gold medals were a fitting conclusion to the duo's under-18 careers. Both will attend school in the U.S. next year, with Paniccia headed for the University of New Hampshire while Cudmore will attend Cornell University.



Hayleigh Cudmore

## Blades, Raiders tickled pink about charity partnership

Two of the fiercest rivals in the Ontario Junior Hockey League have joined forces this season.

The Oakville Blades and Georgetown Raiders have partnered up to organize two Pink in the Rink events to raise money for the fight against breast cancer.

The first of those events will be held tomorrow (Friday) at Joshua's Creek Arenas as the two teams face off in what will also be a showdown of two of the league's elite squads. Game time is slated for 7:30 p.m.

Blades general manager Carlo Coccimiglio, who organized a similar event last season, believes this year's Pink in the Rink will be more successful with the Raiders on board.

"We're better organized this year, working together with Georgetown on this event," Coccimiglio said. "We've been sharing ideas to make both events successful, to raise money for breast cancer."

The Raiders will host the second Pink in the Rink game Jan. 30, when the Blades come to town.

Georgetown general manager and coach James Richmond said he's happy to be working with the Blades, despite the fact Oakville's eliminated Georgetown from the playoffs the past two seasons.

"Every year, we get a bigger and bigger respect for Oakville. We always have very good hockey games, it doesn't turn into a gong

show or a side show, and we respect them," Richmond said. "It just shows you there are good people in hockey. Too many times you hear about all the bad people in hockey, but I think the number of good people in hockey far outweighs the bad people."

The Minor Oaks Hockey Association and Oakville Hornets Girls Hockey Association have also joined the Blades and Raiders for tomorrow's event. The MOHA house league minor bantam Hilda Eagles, coached by Nelson Pavao, will be clad in pink and white when they play an exhibition game against a Georgetown house league opponent at 6 p.m. The Hornets will participate in mini-games between periods of the Blades/Raiders contest.

Other initiatives include the sale of 500 pink cupcakes baked by Iroquois Ridge High School students, "chuck a puck" between periods, the sales of pink ribbons, and draw prizes throughout the game.

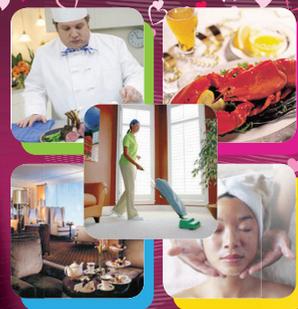
The pink jerseys the Blades will wear during the pre-game warmup will be auctioned off during the contest, and \$2 from every game ticket sold will go to the Canadian Cancer Society, Oakville Unit.

For more information on Pink in the Rink, sponsored by Scamurra Goaltending, log onto oakvilleblades.ca.

— Jon Kuiperij

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