

Growing with the game

Peter Mackie's passion for soccer couldn't be derailed by a health scare

BY LYNN HADRALL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DECLAN OUTHIT

Peter Mackie flips through a family album showcasing his early days in soccer. It is one of many scrapbooks his parents carefully curated over the years.

Photographs, ticket stubs, newspaper clippings and letters chronicle his rise from a lad playing with pals in Guelph to his professional gigs and a short stint playing in the United Kingdom.

Long has he loved the beautiful game. He has played and coached with passion, even after life sent him an unimaginable curve.

Now he has launched a business, an elite training academy for girls and boys who also love the sport embraced around the world.

"It's a bit of a cliché, but the game means everything to me. It allowed me to grow personally," Mackie says.



Peter Mackie has come a long way since his early days on the soccer pitches of Guelph.

Mackie, 52, was born in Scotland and spent his earliest years in Bellshill, a small city just outside Glasgow. His father, Ralph, was a semi-professional soccer player before the family immigrated to Canada.

A toddler when his family arrived, Mackie

learned soccer skills from his father, who worked at Imperial Tobacco in Guelph.

"My parents were very influential with me getting involved with the game. My dad always reminds me that he was the best coach I ever had," Mackie says, laughing.

"But my mom reminds me that they really put me into soccer just because I was extremely shy in school. It's very interesting how you fall in love with the game. You love the game because it's inherited from your family, but there were some other incentives there from my parents. I think they wanted me to just come out of my shell a little bit."

His father was his first coach and quickly pointed out how the game could be improved in Canada.

"My dad took us to this tournament and this Guelph team that I was playing on; we all had running shoes. Nobody wore soccer

*“We want this academy to be for everyone
– accessible, affordable, attainable.”*

PETER MACKIE
RED Academy of Soccer

boots (cleats). My dad went back to the club and said every other soccer club wears soccer boots, so we have to start implementing this policy. That was really cool.”

His mom, Betty, made sure to keep mementoes of Mackie’s career, including contracts and handwritten notes on game sheets – “first pro game, great game, starter, sub.”

She tracked her son from his early amateur days to professional soccer pitches in England and Scotland.

Mackie had been quick to show promise.

He went to two Ontario Cup finals as a youth player. At 16, he played underage with the Guelph Oaks, an under-21 team, winning league most valuable player his first year. He joined the reserve program with the Toronto Blizzard in the former North American Soccer League. He got to train with the senior team and was called up to play games. It was a dizzying time as he got to see soccer legends such as Pele and Johan Cruyff.

He was still a teen when, after a year studying electrical engineering at Sheridan College, he sampled soccer in England, training with the renowned Chelsea club. He spent nine months in Chelsea’s reserve program, also getting exposure to the senior team. But he missed his family and friends in Canada.

“I look back and it was rewarding and satisfying for me. It’s a real test of your mental strength to be over there on your own, playing and training professionally with players. I grew professionally, I grew personally. It was a wonderful experience but, at some point, I realized that I was missing my parents.”

Mackie was overseas for about a year, playing with teams in England and

Scotland. On his return he was recruited to Wilfrid Laurier University. He studied physical education with minors in psychology and geography. And he excelled on the university soccer team.

“Laurier had a great reputation with their soccer program; they were considered a perennial powerhouse in the country. I was quite happy to get into school and start playing on the Laurier team.”

The team went to two national finals. Mackie garnered Ontario all-star and all-Canadian honours while at Laurier. In summers, he played in the Canadian Soccer League.

“I spent four years flying all over the place and it was a really cool time in Canadian soccer. TSN at the time had Soccer Sunday. It was a national game of the week. I consider myself very fortunate to have participated in that league. It was a real breeding ground for the development of the national team and the national team players.”

Coaching and mentoring youth and children was a natural progression. Even before Mackie and his wife, Carolann, had their four children, he volunteered to coach with Kitchener Minor Soccer.

He also spent more than 20 years in full-time mental health work at Lutherwood. By 2003 he was coaching men’s and women’s soccer at the University of Waterloo.

And then he faced a turning point. “In 2011, I really had to make a decision,” Mackie says. “I was diagnosed with colon cancer and realized I had to make some changes. It was too much. I was just burning the candle at both ends.”

Cancer stunned the family. Mackie was 46 and exceptionally fit.

“It was a bit of a shock, but at the same time it was a bit of a blessing in disguise. Sickness is never good. Cancer is cancer, but it was a reality check for me because I had three jobs on the go with a young family. It was really pushing me towards coaching full time and doing what I love to do,” Mackie recalls.

His family found the diagnosis unimaginable.

“He was always in such good shape, joining in on sessions with athletes 20 years younger than him and being the best player in the park,” says Stuart, Mackie’s son. “I was fortunate enough to play with him for two seasons in the local Kitchener and District Soccer League and his passion for the game was unbelievable. For 90 minutes, he didn’t stop. Running, tackling, passing. He could do it all and he left it all on the park, always.”

Stuart can’t remember his father ever getting sick before cancer.

“Maybe that’s why I remember the day we found out about his illness quite vividly,” Stuart recalls. “My dad had a tumour in his colon. It was obviously shocking, shattering, incomprehensible. Our fit, active, seemingly healthy father was seriously sick.”

Family, friends and the soccer community rallied to support Mackie. His wife was a rock.

“She was emotional and worried, but she was unbelievably strong for my siblings and me, and my dad,” Stuart recalls. “So much of what my dad does as a coach wouldn’t be possible without what my mom does behind the scenes. She’s an inspiring mother and an incredible entrepreneur.”

Surgery followed the cancer diagnosis and it worked. No additional treatments were required. Peter Mackie returned to his family and the game he loves. He now sees his illness as a defining moment.

“2011 was a pretty critical time in my life because it made me realize that you just can’t do it all. You have to prioritize.”

He made the tough decision to leave Lutherwood after 23 years and focus on coaching soccer. “I was devastated to leave there. I’m indebted to Lutherwood. They are an unbelievable organization. I still to this day drop in and visit old colleagues there.”

After years of volunteer work and five years as full-time head coach at the Waterloo Soccer Club, Mackie launched RED Academy of Soccer with his son, Stuart.

“My son and I started talking about a small business where we could focus on the athletes. We really want to focus not just on the soccer player but the development of the athlete. We want to take this holistic approach of developing the person.”

Drawing on his background in mental health and his passion for the sport, Mackie wants to train athletes and help them find pathways to soccer at higher levels. It could be college, university or professional.

Today, he combines his soccer academy work with a coaching job at Conestoga College, bringing new energy and focus to the school’s soccer program.

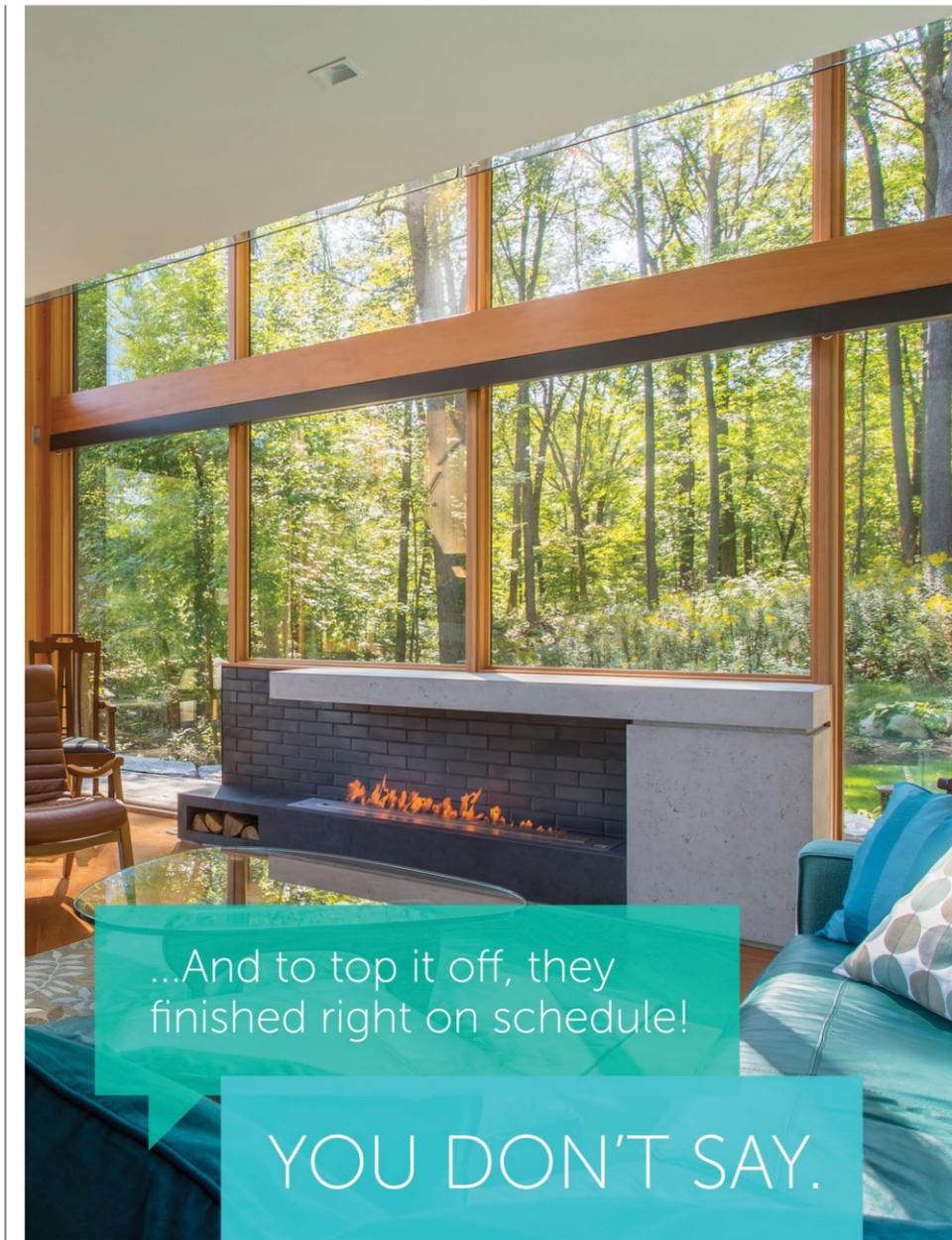
Varsity co-ordinator Marlene Ford was thrilled when the college recruited Mackie. “He knows he’s just not working with a soccer player; he’s working with a student athlete and their health and well-being is above everything to him,” Ford says. “He’s really changing the face of our program.”

Mackie was voted the Ontario Colleges Athletic Association Coach of the Year for Conestoga’s division.

“For him to come in as a first-year coach and be nominated for that, it shows how quickly he has made an impact on our program,” says Ford.

“I’m really excited to keep working with him and create a new culture at Conestoga in a winning culture.”

Mackie and his son launched RED Academy of Soccer in November 2017, intending to build a client base in the first



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year with small-group sessions, one-on-one and technical training. But they were excited to be accepted into the Canadian Academy of Futbol for an Under-12 boys' team this summer. The long-term plan is for three to five academy teams at different age levels.

"In the GTA, there's hundreds of academies and there's a bit of an elitist thing that's attached to the academy. We are really driven to remove that," Mackie says. "We want this academy to be for everyone – accessible, affordable, attainable."

At a recent team practice at Bechtel Park, parents spoke glowingly of Mackie's ability to coach their children in ways beyond technical skills.

Dave Kalbfleisch says his son Owen, 11, loves all sports but soccer is his focus.

"There's not enough words to explain how good Peter and Stuart are as coaches. It's awesome.

"I've been a coach, I have been coached. It's just one of those gut feelings. You can

FIVE QUICK SOCCER QUESTIONS FOR PETER MACKIE

Question: Lionel Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo?

Answer: Messi. I think our house is a Messi house.

Question: Who will win the 2018 World Cup?

Answer: Brazil.

Question: Who should win the 2018 World Cup?

Answer: France.

Question: Grass or turf?

Answer: Grass. I'm 52, man. Grass all the way.

Question: Favourite British Premier League team?

Answer: I grew up as a Glasgow Rangers supporter. That was really through my dad. Slowly I started leaning toward supporting Manchester United. When Stuart was younger, we would drive to Chicago to see Man United play there.

see the dedication, the compassion and just the way the boys react to them."

Players joining the academy are looking for extra training to enhance their skills,

just like youth hockey players taking power-skating or dry-land training.

"If he's not playing, he's on YouTube watching," says Jeff Hunt of his 11-year-old son, Aussie. Hunt installed turf in his basement to make sure his soccer-loving son could play through the winter. While other kids take slapshots in the basement, Aussie kicks soccer balls.

"This area has become so diverse and soccer has become more prevalent," says Hunt. "But what has been missing is alternative training opportunities. A quality coach will make or break a child's interest in something. Peter was one of the best-kept secrets in the region."

Pat Suriano's 11-year-old son, Dominic, was eager to join. Suriano was so committed to the academy concept, he volunteered to design the logo, which incorporates the Scottish lion and a stylized soccer ball.

"Peter has a positive impact with kids. He recognizes each kid and their ability at their

age level. He tailors it to each player and offers a broad spectrum for the kids," says Suriano.

Mackie named his soccer academy RED as a nod to his favourite colour. "Nothing to do with TFC (Toronto) or Manchester United," he points out. Mackie is known to wear a red ball cap and it was easy to build an acronym: R for Ready, E for Educate and D for Develop.

The veteran coach has also used another acronym since coaching at the University of Waterloo. WRIP stands for Work, Rate, Intensity, and Passion.

"My siblings and I were always around the teams and we all remember him using the acronym daily," says Stuart. "A couple of the players, including my sister, Hayley, have (it) tattooed on their wrist. The women's program used to tape their wrists and write WRIP on the tape before each game."

Stuart credits his father's coaching success partly to his infectious personality.

"He gets along with almost everyone he

meets. As a coach, kids absolutely adore him. He leaves his mark on the kids and young adults he has coached that are life-lasting," says Stuart. "Of course, my dad has flaws, like everyone, and he would be the first to admit them. But I admire him very much. He's the ultimate role model for me as an aspiring coach and father."

All four of Mackie's children have embraced the game. Stuart, who played soccer for University of Waterloo, has followed his father into coaching as a part-time coach with the TFC Junior program.

Daughter Hayley was a starting player for the Humber women's varsity soccer team this year. Son Andrew plays on the Conestoga College varsity soccer team and won Rookie of the Year this year. Daughter Taylor played house league soccer and was a competitive highland dancer.

Now that Mackie has leapt into entrepreneurship, he hopes to complement the work done by local soccer groups.

"I have a tremendous amount of respect for all of the volunteer clubs, the big four – Kitchener, Waterloo, Cambridge and Guelph. I used to play in Guelph as a young player. I spent years in Kitchener as a volunteer coach and then I spent years as an employee with Waterloo Soccer Club. So, I have a tremendous amount of respect for all of those four organizations and they all do a great job working with players and working with volunteer coaches," Mackie says.

He remembers how soccer helped him grow and he wants to share that experience. For example, he had each player sign a "contract" when they were chosen for the first academy team. Think signing ceremony, handshake, photo ops.

"That was a really cool thing that they did," says parent Dave Kalbfleisch. "You could light up 28,000 rooms with the faces of those boys that night."

It wasn't just the boys and their parents who were smiling. The man in the red ball cap was beaming too. ●

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