



FRANCIS VACHON THE GAZETTE

Christopher Chamberland's bedroom is full of Habs memorabilia and souvenirs of his own hockey exploits. The 13-year-old's love of hockey is motivating him to work harder at school.

HE'S GOT GAME – AND GRADES

Story by MARK CARDWELL Special to The Gazette

HOCKEY HAS ALWAYS BEEN A BIG PART of Christopher Chamberland's life.

He started playing the game at age four in the arena near his family's home in Ste. Anne de Beaupré, a 20-minute drive east of Old Quebec.

Nine consecutive seasons later, he is a right winger with the local Bantam A hockey team.

His bedroom is a shrine to his favourite team, the Montreal Canadiens. It's filled with Habs memorabilia and souvenirs of Christopher's own minor hockey exploits, including photos, medals and his first helmet, gloves and skates.

"I love hockey," the slender 13-year-old said with a smile. "It's the best."

That passion is now helping to fuel his efforts in the classroom. A second-year student in a sports-concentration program that blends hockey and academics at the local high school, he is working harder than ever in school to keep his average above the 70-per cent minimum required to stay in the popular program.

In return, Christopher and the 156 other kids in the program get 30 days of annual on-ice training with the program's three coaches – all of them retired pros, including former Canadiens enforcer and 1993 Stanley Cup winner Mario Roberge.

"I'm ready to do whatever it takes to stay in the program," said Christopher, who is working with two tutors this session in an effort to raise his grade. "My goal is to play hockey all through high school."

That is music to the ears of his mother, Sylvie L'Heureux. She always feared that her study-challenged son would drop out of high school and go to work for husband Denis's successful excavation and snow-removal business.

She considers the annual \$1,000 fee for the sports program to be the deal of a lifetime.

"It's just incredible the motivation it gives Christopher," she said. "Without hockey his marks wouldn't be anywhere near 70 per cent. They'd be more like 50 – if that."

Similar tales are being told at secondary schools across Quebec as the number and scope of programs that combine sports and studies continue to grow.

There are two options for kids who want to combine sports and study.

One is a certified Sports-Études program for elite athletes who are recognized by their provincial sporting federation and maintain at least an 80-per cent average. First introduced in Quebec in the early 1980s, those programs are only offered at schools that have been officially rec-

ognized by the provincial Education Department. Students receive a weekly minimum of 15 hours of training with top-tier coaches in their sport and classes are compressed into the morning with training in the afternoon, or vice versa. The students live in residence and receive some government funding.

There are currently 3,000 elite student athletes in 32 sports programs in 32 public and eight private schools across the province. That represents a 45-per cent increase in the number of students since 2001.

The Education Department estimates there are about 25,000 students in the second option: sports-concentration programs. The exact numbers of students and schools that offer these programs are not known because they are developed and run as local initiatives by the schools themselves.

What is clear though is that are lots of them – at both French and English schools, public and private – and many more are in the works.

"These programs are extremely popular," said Jean-François Parent, secretary treasurer and communications director of the Premières Seigneuries School Board, which covers the east end of Quebec City, Île d'Orléans and the Côte de Beaupré. "I doubt there are many high schools left in Quebec that don't have or aren't thinking about developing sports-concentration programs of some kind."

According to Parent, the eight high schools in his district offer 20 such programs, including basketball, football, karate, kung fu, swimming, figure skating, soccer and archery. Two more sports – Olympic boxing and gymnastics – are being planned for next year.

He estimates that 20 per cent of the 10,000 secondary school students in the district are enrolled in these programs – a figure that rises to 30 per cent when other concentration programs like language and music are taken into account.

Two of the most popular sports in the area – hockey and skiing – are located at Christopher's school, École Secondaire Mont Ste. Anne.

The arena is located right next door and was sitting idle during daytime hours seven years ago, when the program started. The nearby Mont Ste. Anne ski centre is the training ground for the roughly 250

students who are enrolled in the school's ski program.

More than 400 of the school's 1,100 students are currently in the two programs. To make up for their time away from the classroom, courses are structured differently from those offered to regular students and the sports-concentration students do not take regular gym classes.

Students don't need to excel in a sport to be admitted into the concentration programs, but must have both the desire and the ability to learn.

The programs provide benefits for both students and the school, says principal Michel Légaré.

"They marry kids' interests with a pedagogical approach (that has) a goal to motivate them," he said. "For some, that will mean keeping them in school, for others it will make them better students or people. If we've got kids saying, 'Hey, school is fun,' as a result, that's terrific."

Participants in the programs, he noted, tend to shine brighter academically than regular students – if

“Sports studies demand a lot of teenagers. The pressure to perform can really snowball and the consequences can be brutal.”

LUC NADEAU, UNIVERSITÉ LAVAL

only to keep up with the minimum grade requirements.

Adding to the appeal is the fame of recent graduates like national men's cross-country skier Alex Harvey, 20, who will represent Canada at the Vancouver Olympics. Similarly, the school's hockey teams are a regional powerhouse in organized inter-school sports leagues.

To keep the momentum rolling, the school aggressively markets its programs through school networks and online. "We actively sell them and we've been very successful at it," said Légaré. "The first thing people think of now when they hear our name is sports."

The high school's head of program admissions, Carl Richard visits all 37 public schools in the district every fall to talk to Grade 5 and 6 students, leaving hip CDs, brochures and other promotional material in his wake.

"I explain what the academic requirements are (and) the qualities of the students we're looking for," he

said. "For example, I tell them that if someone hears the teacher say their name more than three times a week in class because they're fooling around, they're probably not going to be accepted."

Richard added that he is often told by primary school teachers that some troublemaking students calm down and work harder following his visits.

While lauding the efforts and impacts of sports study programs at Quebec secondary schools, education and physical education experts warn that schools must strike a healthy balance between the academic and sport objectives of budding athletes.

And they urge parents to play an active role in ensuring their kids aren't getting too much of a good thing.

High school sports-study programs – particularly elite ones – encourage a "hyper-specialization" in sports that harms the development of kids, says Luc Nadeau, a physical education professor at Université Laval who teaches students and trains coaches.

"The danger is that it can limit both their social and physical horizons," said Nadeau, who has coached in a Sports Études program. "If kids are always doing the same activity – hockey or swimming or playing basketball – they lose the chance to be good at other things."

Endlessly repeating the same movements, he added, can also distort the motor development and

cerns – although he sees more good than bad in sports-study programs.

"It all depends on who is running the programs and what the goals are," said Bloom, an associate professor in the department of kinesiology and physical education at McGill University who specializes in sports psychology and is often invited to talk to amateur-league teams and coaches.

Bloom says sports-study programs teach kids how to be organized. They also tend to learn more about healthy living and lifestyles than students in regular programs. And they get lots of life lessons, from dealing with defeat to developing camaraderie.

The biggest benefit, he added, is when sports are used as a motivation to keep kids in school. "When education is tied to the sport and students are held to a minimum average, it is a huge advantage."

On the downside, he said, students can become too focused on sports and neglect homework. They can also sustain overuse injuries because they are playing and training the same muscles over and over.

Schools must also ensure that kids in concentration studies don't get too many privileges compared with other students. "These courses are already elitist in that they cost money to join and require a commitment from parents, which not all kids enjoy," Bloom said. "Schools have to be sensitive to that and not create rifts in the student body."

Parents also have a big role to play. "They need to look at the philosophy of the programs their kids are interested in and the credentials of the people who will be working with the kids," he said.

Bloom advises parents to carefully read mission statements and talk to the school: "If they focus solely on the sport or tell you what a great athlete your kid will become, you're at the wrong place."

Ideally, he added, the people running the programs have teaching degrees – preferably in physical education, which teaches intervention techniques and leadership skills.

"Former athletes and pros might not be aware of all the things we teach about the human body and how to develop muscles properly or to communicate adequately," Bloom said. "And they may have old-school cultural views grounded in the sport that might minimize bad language or see hazing as a team building exercise – when in fact it can scar kids for life."

"For me, sports in school involve a lot more than athletic development," said Bloom.

"They are part of a personal and academic process that can create great citizens and future leaders. The trick is finding the right fit for your kid."