

Sean Beissel

Sean Beissel has been the head coach of the OHA Edmonton U15 Prep team since the program joined the Canadian Sports School Hockey League in 2016/17. In just his second season in the league he won his first CSSHL League Championship. Beissel spent eight years as the academic & athletic development director of operations with the hockey program at Donnan School in Edmonton, Beissel spent four seasons in the Alberta Junior Hockey League in various capacities and nine seasons coaching in the Alberta Midget AAA league.

JM: What's the one thing you're most excited to do once the world kind of gets back to normal?

SB: Oh, man, travel. Travel for sure! I would say golf. But we've been pretty lucky, we've been able to golf. But, yes I would definitely say travel.

JM: Okay, that's perfect because that leads to another question, I actually have which is where's your favorite place to travel?

SB: Yeah, my favorite holiday that we've been on, and where I would probably go first, again, would be Hawaii, the big island.

JM: Have you been a couple of times, then?

SB: I've been once. Among the places we've been to, it would rank as my favorite place. Just the pace of life, the air, just everything was different than any other place I've been. So, it was my favorite and I would go back in a heartbeat.

JM: Okay, nice, do you have a different dream vacation type spot somewhere you haven't been?

SB: Oh, I love traveling. I would go anywhere. One thing that I want to do, for sure is I want to go over to Germany, and Europe with my father in law, who is German born and raised, it's his culture and his experience. My wife and my brother in law, and even my step-daughter have all had a trip there to experience it with him. And I'd like to do that too. Just to get to see it and understand it. And have the history presented to you from someone who lived it.

JM: That's really cool. I went to Berlin for five days two years ago now I think it was. But yeah, it was awesome. I definitely would go back. So, we'll stay on this kind of vacation place to travel topic. Dream place to live if you weren't if you weren't tied down with hockey in Edmonton?

SB: Yeah, you know, I like Florida. We've got family that live in Florida and we have visited. Again, that's one of the places that I really enjoy visiting. But I would like to live there because it's obviously very Americanized, it's not like you're living somewhere that's underdeveloped. Plus, it has all the things that I like; it has deep sea fishing and inland fishing, and it's got golf courses, flat terrain for cycling, all things that I enjoy doing, I'd be able to do there. As well, my wife is a triathlete so the environment for her to train and to continue her sport into our later years would be would be perfect for us.

JM: No, that's, that's awesome. You kind of mentioned there, obviously talk a little bit about golf and then deep-sea fishing. What else do you like to do kind of in your spare time or in the offseason? Stuff like that?

SB: Yeah, so there's not much of an offseason as you know. I had for years and years, coached summer and winter hockey and ran hockey schools and didn't really get to enjoy much of an offseason at all. But, the last couple of years and so, I've got a lot more fishing in the last couple years, which I really enjoy. I've done a lot more golf in the last couple years. I like to cycle. Like I said my wife's a triathlete, so I try and cycle with her once in a while. And then obviously, she leaves me in her dust, but those are the types of things I enjoy doing. I like to be outdoors.

JM: Have you ever thought about competing in a triathlon?

SB: God no (laughs). Not a chance. First of all, I would never be able to do it. I'd never be able to commit to the training. It's absolutely mind boggling the amount of time that my wife commits just to the training alone. And then just, I would never be able to do it.

JM: A little bit different direction now. What are you watching on Netflix or TV right now?

SB: Running out of things to watch. I like Oak Island. It's currently on right now, I just paused it when you called. I like things like History Channel. On Netflix, I'm currently watching a show called StartUp, which is pretty good. I enjoy watching TV. And I enjoy lots of different shows. But probably most like everyone I'm running out of things to watch right now.

JM: Yeah, that seems to be a common answer right now is everyone's basically watched everything there is out there. If you could have any job in the world, and it's not related to sports, what would it be?

SB: Wow, good question, wow...wow. I don't really know. I enjoy people and I enjoy talking and meeting people and learning about people from different parts of the world and you know, their experiences. So, something that would allow me to do that, like, I don't know, owning a bed and breakfast or, a restaurant of some kind or even a cafe. I have always joked I one day want to open up a coffee shop at some point in time. But I wouldn't want to be doing all the work in the kitchen or such, I want to just be socializing with the customer's part.

JM: Just the manager type stuff?

SB: Yeah, yeah.

JM: Yeah, fair enough. Yeah, that's a tricky question for a lot of people, I think because they've spent their whole lives in sports, right. So, to kind of think outside that that's a tough one. So, I know you kind of touched on this a little bit too but you said wife and I believe you said a daughter. What's the family friends picture kind of look like, people close to you stuff like that?

SB: Yeah so born and raised in Edmonton. I've got a brother here. He's married and he's got four kids. I've got a sister and she's got two kids. Really close to my sister and her kids. My niece is

22 now and my nephew is 19. And then at home, there's my wife, Heidi and my stepdaughter, Hanna. Heidi's parents live away. They live in New Brunswick. But her brother lives here in Edmonton. And he's married and has two young twins. So, we see them a fair amount. But at home it's just me, Heidi and Hanna.

JM: That's nice that they are still close to you I'm sure.

SB: Yeah. My wife's mother is from a really big family of eight kids. And they're scattered all over the place. But, you know, we all stay in touch and the whole group will see each other maybe every four years at a family reunion.

JM: Do you have any pets too?

SB: Yeah, we've got a Siberian Husky. Her name is Freeda. Between myself and my wife now she would be our fifth Husky that we've had in the time that we've been married. When we met, I had two and she had one so at one point in time we had three Huskies all together and then they slowly passed away. Now we're now on our fifth one.

JM: So, you guys are obviously big husky fans? Are those pretty difficult to have in the in the Edmonton area or is it okay because it gets pretty cold here in the winter.

SB: The biggest issue with them is the shedding, they just shed non-stop. And in particular two times a year they really shed which is what Freeda is doing right now. But like I said, my wife is out running and they love to run so it gives her something to run with. She likes to run in the mornings before work. So, it's a big dog that is a little bit intimidating and loves to run. So, it's a good partner for her that way. The one that we had, I think he completed six half marathons himself, even had his own medals. So, she used to run in the wintertime with him all the time.

JM: That's pretty cool. What's something that most people might not know about you? Outside of hockey, you know something I can't just find on the internet? Something the general public, who doesn't know you, might be interested to know.

SB: So, I'm a tracheostomy patient. I don't know if you know that or not. I wear a tracheostomy stoma stent which allows me to breathe more effectively. Nine years ago, I was diagnosed with a really rare disease called Granulomatosis with Polyangiitis. And prior to that disease being diagnosed and treated, one of the things that it did, was it paralyzed my vocal cords shut essentially. Prior to the trach my breathing was very, very impaired, because your vocal cords are supposed to move, open when you breathe and close when you talk and mine are just closed all the time. So yeah, I've got a tracheostomy tube. And I've had it now for three years. Initially, I resisted the doctors to get it, fought with them for four years that I didn't want it. But eventually, I just got to the point where I couldn't do anything without being at a loss for breath. So, I conceded and got the tube and it's the best thing I've ever done.

JM: Has it been a pretty big battle of yours in life or I guess adjustment?

SB: Well, the biggest battle was being sick prior, like what I was prior to the trach. After the trach, life has been way easier. But prior to the trach was the biggest battle. And even prior to

being diagnosed was a battle because I just didn't understand why I couldn't breathe and why I couldn't do things that I used to be able to do. And so, it just led to a more sedentary lifestyle, which then led to weight gain. And so, I was unsure if I was sick, or if I was just out of shape. But no matter what I did to get back in shape. I just couldn't because I just couldn't breathe and that was fine. I still managed through that. I still managed to run a run a half marathon and do some things that I like to do, but not to the level that I ever could before. And then like I said it eventually got so bad that I literally couldn't walk upstairs. I'd be out of breath after practice, I might have to take a break mowing the lawn, those types of things. That was the biggest struggle. And then the other biggest struggle was thinking about how negatively getting the trach would impact my life. And it was more the exact opposite. It has impacted my life in such a positive way that I'm able to do things that I wasn't able to do before. I was able to feel better; I was able to sleep better or just everything was better. And it was this whole mental block that I had about getting it because I didn't want to be perceived as handicapped. But I already was.

JM: I'm glad to hear you're obviously doing better now with everything and it's kind of worked out for you. We will kind of move into the coaching but stay on that topic a little bit. Did that have a big impact on your coaching while everything was kind of going on?

SB: Yeah, I don't really know if it did or didn't? That's a really good question. I think I still, you know, pushed myself through. If anything, where I felt the most normal when I was sick, and prior to being diagnosed, and prior to having the trach take place, where I felt the most normal and the most myself was coaching. Whether that was on the ice at practice or a game, or in the dressing room. During those moments I didn't struggle as much. I mean, I obviously did, but I wasn't aware of it because my mind was occupied with something else. So, it did change, I would say that I would use my staff more to communicate at times. Now, during practice, I do things differently than I would have done prior to having the trach. In fact, I often don't use a whistle anymore. I tap the boards with my stick instead. Now I'm just probably not as communicative during practices as I have been in the past.

JM: Okay. That's good to hear that it hasn't really impacted you too much. How did you get involved in coaching to begin with?

SB: I was going to school in North Dakota, going to university in North Dakota at the University of Jamestown. I was playing football down there. And I hadn't played hockey in probably three years. After high school, I played junior football and then I went from junior football down to the states and I certainly hadn't been in an American hockey rink in my entire life. One day during football practice, I was looking over and saw the hockey rink was kind of just off campus and kind of made a note to myself to go check it out one day and so I did. And I'm standing there watching these young kids practice and kind of revel in just being in a rink again, and I end up talking to this guy who, unbeknownst to me at the time, was the President of the Minor Hockey Association. He asked if I knew anything about hockey and where I was from. When I told him, I was from Edmonton as soon as I said that, he asked me if I wanted to get involved coaching in their youth program. And so, for the first 2 years that I went to school, I was involved in coaching with the youth program the last few years I helped with the high school team. I found my love for hockey again and found my love for coaching. So that led me to go live in Minnesota for two years and coach high school hockey in Minnesota. But I ended up moving

back to Edmonton, started coaching midget AAA hockey. I turn 50 years old this year so I've been coaching for 30 years

JM: Well that's quite the journey and I didn't realize you had that football background. Was the NFL the dream originally?

SB: (Laughs) I wasn't that good. My dad was a really intense hockey dad. I was a goaltender and I broke my thumb on my catching hand going into my Grade 11 year and didn't end up playing hockey that year at all but ended up playing football and it was a bit of a rescue from the pressure of hockey. I enjoyed football and was good at it. I was lucky enough to play with the Edmonton Wildcats for three years. And then I was lucky enough to get recruited to go down to a couple different schools and I chose Jamestown and it was a great experience. But I certainly wasn't an NFL caliber player. It would have been a stretch for me to even be considered a CFL player. I was a pretty good player but I guess at one point I did aspire to play in the CFL. But that wasn't in the cards. I wasn't fast enough to play in the secondary and I wasn't big enough to play as a linebacker. And plus, I found my calling as a coach. I really remember my last year playing I kind of wasn't really that interested in playing as I was focused on coaching.

JM: That's really interesting. Do you feel like you kind of learned things from football that helped you translate to your coaching and hockey?

SB: 100%. When I was growing up, there wasn't goalie coaches and there weren't specialized coaches. There was very little individual coaching. There were lots of managing and lots of bench management. In football, what I learned, especially when I went down south is the finite details involved in team tactics, involved in individual skills, that I hadn't experienced in hockey at that time and are now starting to exist in the coaching of hockey. But that's kind of what I remember playing football, being conscious of the most finite details of movement or different team tactics, how all of the players work in conjunction with one another, and thinking that was never anything that I'd learned at all in hockey.

JM: Yeah, I feel like we've seen a shift here with the addition of skills coaches. But we'll move on from that. So, you coached I believe in Fort Saskatchewan for two years and then Sherwood Park for seven?

SB: I started off coaching Midget in Spruce Grove. And then I coached in Fort Sask for two or three years. Then I coached the junior team in Fort Sask, then I went to Grand Prairie and coach junior there. And then I ended up back in Edmonton and coached in Sherwood Park for six years, and Fort Sask for two years. And then I ended up in the CSSHL.

JM: What drew you into the CSSHL?

SB: I mean, the model of the CSSHL is exactly what I wanted to do and was doing when I was coaching, high school hockey in Minnesota. And it's exactly what I aspired to have and dreamt of having in Canada. But it just didn't exist. And I certainly didn't have the skill set, or the know-how, or the wherewithal to put together that type of setup. But once the CSSHL did show up on the scene and did start to develop, that was something I was very interested in. I was interested in

the model of the education and the athletics all together. And like I said it was what I was doing when I was in Minnesota coaching high school hockey.

JM: That seems to be a common theme. You actually kind of answered my next question there about what you liked about the model. So, I just got two more here for you and the next one here is the best piece of advice you've ever gotten in life? And it doesn't have to be hockey related. Could just be something that's kind of stuck with you.

SB: My college football coach, when I told him that I wanted to be a career coach, and that I wanted to be a career hockey coach in particular. The advice wasn't for hockey, the advice was about being a career coach. And his advice was twofold. One revolved around how difficult it is to have a family life and a successful marriage through that career choice and what he said was your choice of partner is going to be paramount for you to be able to have career success and have your personal goals and personal family life goals fulfilled. And so that was paramount. It was something I always thought about. As I was dating it was one of the first things that I really identified in my future wife was just that how much she supported my career goals and supported my desire to be a coach. And in fact, when we first started dating, I tried to get out of coaching and she's the one who convinced me to stay in it. The other one was, again, same advice from the same person, he told me that if you're going to be a coach and you're going to be a successful coach, you need to be willing to take all the blame when your team doesn't play well and doesn't win. And you need to be willing to pass on all the credit to your assistant coaches and your players when your team wins. And that's stuck with me my whole life. I've been fortunate enough to have teams that have been really successful, and players that have moved on and been very successful. I'm adamant that the credit goes to the players in all those situations and that all I was an advisor for them.

JM: I really liked that last one. That's a good one. Just one more question here for you. What is your favorite or funniest hockey memory, or maybe something even just unique that that kind of sticks out for you?

SB: Man, that it is a good question. Well, I can say that's the first game that I coached after getting my tracheostomy tube. The tube itself fell out in the middle of the game on the bench and the trainer had to put it back in. The players are trying to focus on the game and they're all looking over their shoulder at me. And the other thing that would have happened that I didn't think of initially, which reminds me of it right now is I used to wear a speaking valve while I coached so that when I when I spoke I didn't need to put my finger on the tube, I just could speak. It was a one-way valve that let air in. If I tried to blow air out it would force the air over the vocal cords. I went to raise my voice in the dressing room one time and the speaking valve shot off. Shot the whole length of the dressing room and landed at the feet of a player. And the team obviously wanted to die laughing but they're unsure if they should do that. I started laughing so they started laughing. So yeah, just small things like that I can think of right off the top of my head. There's lots of other things, obviously but those are two things that I feel comfortable sharing.

JM: Well, that's good that you were able to laugh about those instances after they happen.

SB: What's your choice?

JM: Yeah fair enough. Those memories are pretty unique and maybe not something people would think of. I know you've obviously won in the CSSHL before so I think that's what most people would assume.

SB: Winning memories are great. But something that's unique, that's not hockey related. Those are things in all honesty that those group of kids when they're 25 years old, they're having a beer, those are probably two of the first stories that will come out.