

## **Paul Pascuzzi**

Paul Pascuzzi is the current General Manager of Okanagan Hockey Ontario and has spent the past seven years working with individuals diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in various roles, including ABA services at Donald A. Wilson Secondary School and providing social skills training to those in need.

The Whitby, Ont. product has been a head coach at the minor hockey level since 2010, most recently with the Clarington Midget AAA team from 2016-2018 after spending two seasons with the Whitby Midget AAA team. He was also the head of coach and player development for the 2017-2018 season.

JM: What was the thing you were most excited to do as COVID-19 restrictions started to ease up.

PP: Yeah, I've been saying for us it's just about being able to display our full program with the training. So last year with COVID, unfortunately, we didn't get to play games, right? And as we're going through the summer right now, we're not fully passive by any means, but just being able to be back in the rink. It's just being able to display our team and our league on a full scale, right? And you're talking to families who are returning to the program and say, "Okay, I'm excited for you guys to see the competition level. I'm excited for you guys to see us traveling and taking the bus into Ottawa," and different things like that. And for the players, getting that full experience of staying in the hotel rooms again. Those kinds of things because last year is all about training. We're hoping this year, it's okay. Again, my fingers crossed and knock on wood, but hopefully, get back to what the full year typically looks like.

JM: Can you paint a picture a little bit for me of maybe where you live now, the family situation, and where you grew up? If you have any pets, just kind of a little bit about that?

PP: Yeah. I'm born and raised in in Whitby, ON. Okanagan Hockey Ontario began in 2018. At that time, I was coaching a local U18 AAA team. I've been coaching as a non-parent head coach for eight years. I've worked with kids with autism and worked in the Durham District School Board and through a company called Lake Ridge Community Support Services. I was doing that in line with coaching for about eight years. Everything came together in the sense of I was getting married in June 2018 and I was given the job opportunity in May 2018. And fast forward now, four years later, I have a son who's two years old named Carter. He's an absolute beauty and a lot of fun. So, I grew up playing and working with it my whole life. I was born and raised here. The opportunity to have a full-time job in the hockey world in my hometown is pretty special. I've got no pets, though. The wife wants a dog. My wife will be pushing for a dog for sure, but I grew up having a cat. I'm trying to avoid dogs right now at all costs as we continue to grow our family and stuff like that.

JM: Fair enough. You mentioned this a little bit, it's leading to another question. How did you get involved in your current role, if you want to dive into that a little bit?

PP: Yeah. As I mentioned, I was coaching a U18 AAA team in the area. And as Okanagan program got announced, I reached out to a colleague. I reached out to Darren Dreger, I coached

his son Mason. I asked Darren, "Is this the company and program you were telling me about?" kind of in passing, and he said, "There might be a program coming to town so you want to keep your tabs on," kind of thing and so it was. He introduced me to Andy Oakes, our president. I sat down with Andy and we had a conversation there getting to know each other. I was interviewing for what I thought would be the head coach position. And I left the interview and my wife's like, "How do you feel?" and I'm like, "I feel like we hit it off. I feel like it went great," but I just don't think, you know? I didn't play pro, I played local at a University in CIS. And I said, "I think they're looking for a bigger name on a national scale versus like a Durham region local scale," right? So Andy calls me back and we sat down and lets me know, "Mike Duco is still with our company and he's going to be the head coach of the team, but I want to talk to you a bit more about this other role," and at the time, it was a business operations manager title. And I'm like, "Okay. What does it entail? What does it look like?" and so I ended up taking a year of leave from my old job. And they were so supportive like, "Hey, go for it, it is your passion. Go for it and see how it goes." And a year later, it was, "Hey, Paul, we're going to go on with you as GM. You're going to be general manager." So, I've been running the operations for four years now.

JM: What about the CSSHL model do you like most?

PP: Yeah, a few things. A couple of things is, first and foremost, just being able to play on weekends; the travel and games on the weekends. It's following almost like an NCAA model, right? So even families, I think from the first year till now, it just showed you the growth of the program. The families are like, "I'm not used to not playing on a Tuesday night at nine o'clock," and I said, "Yeah, I know, it's great, isn't it?" You trained during the day and you get your schooling done during the day. You go home and you have dinner. And when you go to bed, you get a great rest as everybody needs, and you do it all over again the next day. And the weekends are meant for travel and games, you're still doing study hall, and you're still getting your work done. It allows families and players to truly maximize their development and I think that's the key to why we're here. We're here to maximize your potential as a student-athlete. It's not just about hockey, it's about your studies and your academics. And I always say to families, "Where are you going to be 10 years from now? Where are you going to be 15 years down the road?" Like this is what it's all about. It's not just about hockey, right? It's about preparing them for life after high school, life after hockey or whatever that may be, and trying to equip them with those life skills.

JM: Yeah, absolutely. It's a perfect answer. So, we'll dive now a little bit more into some of the lighter questions I was talking about. What is one thing that you're maybe not good at but you wish you were? It doesn't have to be anything even remotely hockey-related.

PP: One thing that I'm not good at but I wish I were. I'm thinking what my wife would say, she'd be honest with the answer. I would say I don't have an artistic bone in my body. So, whether it's singing, whether it's playing an instrument, or whether it's drawing. I'm getting better at coloring because I do it with Carter. I never liked art class. I dread that day. It's something that I don't have. I don't have that creativity.

JM: I'm the same way. I have zero creative artistic ability in that sense so I get that. So, you've talked about hating art class and music class, but what was your favorite school subject? Whether that was in elementary or you mentioned university a little bit.

PP: Yeah. So, as a kid growing up, I was an athlete so the generic like gym class is the favorite part. But in my school, I was easy-going in school, I am not going to lie. It's not that I floated by, but I was very easygoing. I just enjoyed friendships, getting to know everybody. I would like to think I was a good person and liked by everybody in the class. But as I got older, the study of behavior and learning about psychology, and learning about why we do things or how people behave. And when I first picked up a psychology textbook, it was like, "Hey, this seems like common sense to me," so that's where it's kind of connected. I ended up being a psych major as my degree. And as I said, I used to work with kids with autism for three years and I loved it. It's all behavior management and being able to support those kids, right? So, as a kid, I didn't have a favorite subject, but I liked history. If you asked me in high school, other than the gym, I'd say history. That's it. And as I got older, it has kind of switched over to psychology and the study of behavior, and behavior management. Things like that.

JM: Okay. That sounds good. So, you mentioned the psychology degree, working with the autism spectrum disorder, and things like that. Is there anything else that people in the hockey community might not know about you that you think is interesting and important?

PP: Yeah, for me, even just coming from my family. I'm Italian, my parents are both Italians. My mom comes from Italy. My dad was born, I'm not sure, but their family is from Italy. And then my grandfather, even on my mom's side. I come from a family where my grandfather is like, "You want to eat, you got to work." I come from a family that worked extremely hard. I got two brothers so there are three of us. Both my parents worked full-time jobs. My dad worked as GM in OSH right here for over 40 years. The guys that I worked with knew I'm always working and sometimes they're like, "Hey, take a break, man." I love my job, it's a passion so it's never working for me, but I also just believe that I come from that, you know? You're raised a certain way sometimes, right? You were raised to work and make sure you're providing for your family. So, I guess it would just be having that passion for hockey and coming from that kind of family where we're put the work in. My grandparents on my mom's side came over from Italy in 1960. They came over with nothing and were working locally and building and raising a family. And that kind of translates to my parents, just raising a family and doing what you can for your family. So now that I have my own family, I have the same mindset, right? You're putting the work in and you want to be the absolute best you can be in your job, right? And for us, that translates to our coaching staff, and our students. In the sense that I'm going to do anything, I can for them, to make sure they're getting the best out of their experience here.

JM: Awesome. That's a good one. If you had to eat one food for every meal for the rest of your life, what would it be, and why?

PP: Is it bad if I say like lasagna? I'm a meat and potatoes guy. So, growing up Italian, I'm eating tons of pasta, any homemade pasta. I'm spoiled with my grandmas cooking, it's homemade. So sorry, the question is, if I had to eat something with every meal?

JM: Yeah. It was your only meal for the rest of your life.

PP: Yeah, give me a nice plate of lasagna. It might be funny for the carb-loaders, right? Like I'm pretty sure the Doug Gilmour Commercial. I got buddies who are laughing at me and going, "Hey, there you are, growing up," right? I'm just a classic carb-loader.

JM: If you're a baseball player you have a walk-up song. A UFC fighter, you have an entrance song. What would be the song of your choice or something like that?

PP: Yeah, 'Eye of the Tiger' is one for sure. I love the Rocky movies growing up and 'Eye of the Tiger' is one. I'm trying to think of the name of it. I think it's 'Money City Maniacs', I believe, by Sloan. It's got the siren intro. I don't know if you remember that one. You're stepping up as the sirens are going, and like that's the opening of it. Those are the two jams for sure. And then the lighter one is probably 'How Bizarre', which is just one of those '80s tunes.

JM: If you could spend one day living as a different person, who would that person, and why? So, you got the opportunity to live in someone else's shoes for a day.

PP: If I'm going to live in somebody else's shoes through the day. You know what? My son's name is Carter, which my wife liked the name, and I was like, "Yeah, no problem. Joe Carter." I like Joe Carter right there. So, I would maybe pick like a major league baseball player or an NHL player. Because growing up I'm playing hockey, let's maybe change the sports a little bit. I'd say somebody like a Joe Carter or anyone who won the World Series, right? So being able to live in their shoes a little bit in that sense and just live that life a little bit.

JM: That's a good answer. I like that. I think you touched on this a little bit, but what do you like to do in your spare time away from the rink?

PP: Staying with my family, so family first. Carter keeps us busy right now. I picked up golfing through COVID a little bit more than I used to so I try to golf. And of course, when the NFL season starts, I'm watching football every Sunday. I'm pretty easygoing when it comes to being outside of work when you're busy and you want to relax a little bit. My wife is from Parry Sound, which is two and a half hours north from here. We enjoy going up there as well, especially in the summers. They got a spa on Georgian Bay so I'd take my gear on a boat and doing things like that. It's all seasonal, to be honest. Things change during the year, right? In the winter, it's football, in general. You don't do much in your season with hockey. Now, outside all of the family things, that's what I'll be doing for sure.

JM: This one doesn't have to be hockey-related, but just the best piece of advice you've ever gotten in life.

PP: The best piece of advice? I don't know. That's a tough one.

JM: If nothing sticks out, that's fine.

PP: I don't have much. But from a hockey perspective, I always try to say like, you're only as good as your last game, almost in the sense, you always have to continue improving yourself and you can't live in the past. You can't look back like last year where you played and how good you were because it doesn't matter for the most part. People need to know how you're doing now, they're watching you now, so you're only as good as your last game. It goes with that classic hockey line, "one shift at a time," but that was more of a hockey thing. Yeah, I don't know. It's an interesting one, for the advice. As I said. if anything, I'd go back to what my Grandpa used to always say. He spoke barely any English so it's all broken at that time, but he said, "If you want to eat, you got to work." So again, you had to put work in and you got to be successful if you want to provide, right?

JM: That first one is a good answer. I think a lot of kids sometimes can get caught up in what they've already done, you know? Maybe they get drafted to the OHL, WHL, or something. They forgot that there's still a lot of work that needs to be done. I like that first answer. Last one here for you. Just looking back over your time in hockey, whether it's coaching or playing, or whatever. What's just a memory that stands out to you? So, whether it's just your favorite hockey memory, really funny, or something unique. Just a hockey memory that always jumps out to you.

PP: Yeah. I think from a hockey memory, I was privileged to have some successful hockey teams as a coach. When you look back, you always remember the fun times, right? When you're playing hockey, you always remember your coaches, who you had fun with and you remember that. I don't know if I have a specific memory. I got memories, but to me, it always goes back to the times we're having fun. So, from a coach perspective, winning all championships is great, but I think it's going back to the fun side of things.