

Justin Simpkins

Justin Simpkins is the founder and Director of the Prairie Hockey Academy. He first developed the AAA Crusader program in Caronport in 2009 with the mission and goal to work at developing a program that was dedicated to inspiring more than just athletes, but life champions with a heart first approach to hockey development on and off the ice. Simpkins played four seasons in the Alberta Colleges Athletic Conference (ACAC) with Briercrest College.

JM: What are you most excited to do once COVID is kind of done and there's no restrictions or anything like that?

JS: Travel to Maui with my family.

JM: Do you go often?

JS: No, I've only gone twice but it's my favorite destination. I can't wait to be able to take my kids and go on a trip somewhere. But I'd say that and just my wife and I really love to host and our kids miss their friends. So, we look forward to having some friends over for supper and that kind of thing.

JM: Definitely. Just getting back to that normality of seeing people. What's your favorite genre of music, your favorite artists, the best concert you've been to, something like that?

JS: Best concert I've ever been to is Jack Johnson at the Sydney Opera House. That was unreal. Really cool experience. And then, favorite genre of music, that's a good question. How about this one to make people get to know me? I think Justin Bieber's new albums have been fantastic to hear.

JM: I actually agree but that's an interesting answer. Favorite sport outside of hockey?

JS: I would have to say I probably enjoy golfing, but if I'm watching a sport, it would have to be NFL.

JM: Do you golf a lot?

JS: I used to many months ago but I don't anymore now with the season and the life I'm in.

JM: This one might be a tricky one for you. I don't know if you think about this ever, but if you could have one superhero ability, what would it be?

JS: If I had one superhero ability, I haven't really thought of that before, but obviously, the idea of flight like Superman is pretty incredible, right? I mean that's got to be the number one superhero ability, isn't it? I'm not sure what's better than that.

JM: That's a good one. I think that's probably a lot of people's choice. Who's your favorite athlete? It doesn't have to be hockey-related.

JS: Favorite athlete, okay. You know what? I'm a die-hard Oilers fan so today (day after Oilers were eliminated); it's been a tougher day for me and I'd say that probably because my favorite athlete was always Wayne Gretzky growing up and that should be it.

JM: I feel your pain today as well. Obviously, I'm an Oilers fan too, so that was a tough one yesterday. Would you rather have a personal chef, a personal driver, or a personal housemaid?

JS: I'd say, chef.

JM: Timing wise? Like just it takes a lot of time at dinner or you're just not just a great cook or just nice to have someone else do it for you?

JS: I'd say probably a time of life or season of life for me again with three young kids, having someone I know could make sure that I always have healthy whole food and cooking something that we should be eating. That kind of thing would be helpful. I think that it would be a toss-up because I know for my wife and I having someone to clean the house all the time too would be pretty cool, then we could just focus on cooking, right?

JM: Okay, you've touched on this a bit. You have a wife and three kids but maybe just paint a picture of your family a little bit, maybe where you grew up, where you live now. Stuff like that.

JS: Yes, for sure. I grew up in Regina. We live in Moose Jaw now. My wife is from Southern Alberta from Taber, land of the corn. We've been married 14 years and we have an almost 7-year old, 4-year old, and a 1-year old and so that's live right now as we know it. But I grew up in the prairies in Saskatchewan. When you asked me what my favorite sport is, I said golf and I think I just enjoy sports. Like the kids we're playing kickball beside the park yesterday. And I just wanted to play. I just want to play with them. I just love sports, and whether it's baseball or kickball or anything like that. And even just getting out and throwing a baseball, so much fun. And so, for me, that's how I grew up. I grew up enjoying sport and the camaraderie of sport and in Saskatchewan here and we just played. We played in the wind and the heat but that's just what we did as kids. So those are my best memories. It's just pick-up baseball games in the park with boys and girls. It didn't really matter, right?

JM: Yes, that's good. That's kind of what I remember, too from my childhood. Seems like kids don't really do that anymore though a lot, just video games now. What's something people don't know about you that you might think is interesting?

JS: Let me think here. I'm not pretty interesting. Let's see. I like cycling and I even enjoy spin class a lot. But maybe that's not that interesting.

JM: No, that's still is and it's something that people don't know about yet. Do you have like spin bike and all that, too or you just usually go to classes?

JS: Yes, I do have a spin bike. I actually have a Peloton which has been one of the best investments of my life but I even got the chance to use a road bike to cycle the Great Ocean Road in Australia.

JM: Well, that's cool. How long does that take?

Justin: You know what I only did about a 60-kilometer chunks so it took me about an hour and fifty minutes. Something like that.

JM: How many times you been to Australia?

JS: I lived there for a year and launched an agriculture company there, in 2013-14. How about that, there is something people probably don't necessarily know about me.

JM: Yes, so how did that happen? How did that work for you?

JS: When I left coaching college hockey in 2011, I joined an agriculture company and that took me and my wife to Australia for eleven months from July of 2013 to June of 2014. And so, I actually had the chance have one of the coolest experiences probably of my life with some of the things we did there like the Great Ocean Road on a bike. But I also drove in a little Toyota Camry from essentially Sydney, Australia all the way to Perth. So, basically, from the East Coast to the West Coast. And we drove straight across the country and you have to drive what's called the Nullarbor Highway or the Nullarbor Desert. And there's not a gas station for like every couple hundred kilometers. You kind of have to make sure you get gas and since you're sweltering in the 40 degrees you have to make sure you have water. And yes, it's quite the trip. Let's put it that way. It's a thirty-six-hour drive that could kill us.

JM: Oh, wow.

JM: That's really cool. I'm assuming obviously, you really enjoyed living there. Did you think about staying longer?

JS: We definitely did. Yes, we enjoyed our time there. We loved the culture, made some incredible friends. I think what I just learned about the Australian culture is they've kept a little bit of the culture, maybe what we had here in Canada years ago and some of the British influence. And just at the same time, there's a large Italian influence so I felt like relationships and friendly family and friendships were really high on their focus. It wasn't about supersizing your life or getting an extra-large coffee. It was about sitting down and enjoying a smaller, high-quality coffee and enjoying time with friends. And so, the pace of life was different. We would go out for supper with friends and supper would be at 8 p.m. So, I always found that interesting. If you went on a date night with your spouse and with a couple, it wasn't like, 'Hey, let's quickly go to Earl's. We'll crush supper and then we'll run to the movie theater and watch a movie.' You chose not to go to a movie or just go for supper because supper was an event. It was two to three hours. And you just enjoy the company. And so, I'm a big relationship person. I think that's what, you know even COVID has really impacted me on that side as I'm an extrovert and I enjoy people and relationships. And that was what I got to experience in Australia.

JM: That sounds like it's a good time of your life for you. So obviously, you eventually moved back here. How did you kind of get involved with Prairie Hockey Academy?

JS: I started a kid's hockey program back in 2010 and had some great people like Erik Robitaille, who is still working with us at Prairie, run it for me in the spring of 2014 while I was in Australia still. So, we started in 2010 and kept growing it. And one thing led to another where we were renting all of our ice in Caronport and the high school kind of asked if we would be interested in starting a high school hockey program. That was in December or November of 2015. I kind of didn't bother thinking about it over Christmas. I looked at it again in January of 2016 and then I think I remember reaching out to Kevin (Goodwin) around the same time and then we started taking the necessary processes to start the Hockey Canada Accredited School application. So that's kind of how that happened. Kind of organically grew out of a kid's spring program that I started in 2010 with the desire to teach some leadership lessons and principles. I was learning from my mentor and trying to teach it to 10 and 11-year old's. So just teaching them that, 'All of you can be leaders,' the simple definition of a leader is someone who takes responsibility. Teaching them they can do that and live that out in their Elementary school classrooms, at home, with our community responsibility like taking out the garbage's or doing the dishes or even just how we treat our siblings. And so that's how it started. We saw incredible growth from young kids. I learned these simple principles and it grew from one spring group to five or six spring groups and it kept growing to the point where like, 'Hey, maybe we can do this all year round.' And here we are today at Prairie Hockey Academy.

JM: Yeah, that's cool. It's a good story. What do you like the most about the CSSHL model in general?

JS: What I like most is the focus on student-athletes from every single program. I just think everyone's rooting for everyone else in their development and what they see. I mean, it's really cool when you have a student-athlete and then they go on to the next level and you get some texts from other coaches or other directors in the program just to congratulate that student-athlete or you and what they've seen from them in competition. And then the camaraderie that we see at the showcases like man, did I miss that this year. You go to the showcase with all these like-minded student-athletes and coaches and developers. And you have the chance to stay connected with coaches in the hallways and you're talking. You're watching great gameplay and it's just an incredible group and program to be involved in just because of that focus on excellence and integrity and then just developing the whole student-athlete.

JM: Yeah that student-athlete aspect of it seems to be a pretty common theme. Obviously, it sets kids up well for the future, too. What's the best piece of advice you've ever gotten in life? And again, it doesn't have to be hockey-related. It could just be a general life tip.

JS: My mentor in 2015 really helped me with something he called heart posture and it had always been a challenge. So, I guess, the best tip I got was just, in every situation, whether I'm talking about somebody or something was just to always check what my heart posture was. And so obviously, that whole attitude idea of being grateful. If you have that and it completely changes your outlook. So even my heart posture toward an athlete and the problems the student-

athletes that we're working with or dealing with or having, helping them try and learn a new skill. And I think that's started coming with that approach in a lot of things in my life has really helped me see through problems and see opportunities and that kind of thing.

JM: That's a good one. I just got one more here for you. Maybe, what's your favorite or funniest, or most unique hockey memory? Maybe even something that stands out when you just think about the game that kind of pops out to you.

JS: You know what? For me Jordan, I think of a couple of things. I guess I had a chance to coach this really young group of spring kids. And we were working on some character values and some leadership principles. And we got into a tough hockey game where it felt like the reffing was just putting our kids in a spot that they might get injured. One of our kids got hit from behind pretty badly. And I remember, I kind of got emotional on it and I told the ref that it was bulls**t, right? And I swore and I felt pretty bad because I was working with 12-year old players. And in between intermissions, I actually recognized that we as a group have set some standards, some character, and some value stuff that we were working on establishing and that I'd broken them just with my actions on the bench and how I spoke to the ref. And so, I actually had to apologize to this group of twelve-year-old's and ask them if I had their permission to join them on the bench for the third period as their coach. And it was really funny actually to watch these twelve-year-old's, all kind of stop and just kind of look at you and not really know what to say. And so, I had to ask them again, right and just say, "Hey, because this is what we set as our standards and I as your coach and the adult here actually broke them. So, I need to ask your permission and for your forgiveness, right?" So, they forgave me and wanted me back on the bench. It was really cool. And it's just a unique moment. I felt like a lot of the things that we were teaching I realized that I had to model them myself. And then I guess for me it's a maybe it's a weird hockey moment. It's not a championship or anything like that but for me, it was the idea that if we're going to teach you the leadership principles, we need to model them and when I did at that game, I felt like we had this huge growth afterward with our kids from that. So, I feel like when I go back, what we're trying to do, that was a big moment for me. And then on a personal side and then on the program side, one of my best memories right now, hockey-wise is our team when Prairie Hockey Academy was accepted into the CSSHL, that was really big. And when we hosted our very first home game against NAX, you were actually an assistant coach with them, that was our first-ever home game. That was a lot of fun. Just to be in the league and get to compete against a program like NAX, which, you know is a fantastic program. Full of guys that know how to develop student-athletes, and to compete with them was really cool. So that was really one of those moments where it just felt good, right?

JM: I see you guys are obviously doing something right over there because I know the last two years, it's fun to coach against good teams, obviously, but it was also stressful because you guys seemed to have our number a couple of times the last two years. Good close games, it was fun. And then in terms of the first story about being a leader and identifying a mistake and being able to correct that I think that's something coaches need to make sure they're able to do and it's tough to kind of hold yourself to that standard sometimes.

JS: Yes, for sure. I mean I played some college hockey and I made the best of friends and four of my groomsmen we're on my college hockey team and at my wedding, and just the friendships

and the camaraderie we had. And I remember being in playoffs with them and just those moments for me and my last game as a college athlete. You know, losing in playoffs wasn't fun but I can still remember competing with those guys like it was yesterday, right? So those are pretty cool. We didn't win the championship, but we battled hard with each other and had each other's back and we had a lot of fun.