

Fundy Gymnastics Club sending eight athletes to Canada Games

SCOTT BRIGGS Telegraph-Journal

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As the leaders of the Fundy Gymnastics Club, Nick and Nancy Blanton are understandably thrilled that eight of their athletes are on Team New Brunswick for the 2015 Canada Winter Games in Prince George, B.C.

The honour roll includes Myranda Talbot, Abigail Dolan, Patrick Talbot, Antoine Gautreau, Thomas Gautreau and Cameron MacMaster, along with alternates Liam Dalton and Jenecca Crossman.

But before the competition begins in mid-February, the husband-and-wife duo also want to make sure the young competitors focus on the process as much as the outcome.

“I want them to know that it’s not about the winning and the losing, and it’s not about where they place,” said Nick, the head coach of both the Fundy Gymnastics Club and New Brunswick’s Canada Games men’s team. “Our strategy going into these Canada Games with these athletes is to complete clean routines and to make sure they stay on the apparatus and don’t fall. Gymnastics is a game of chance and very often you’ll have two sides of the story – overload difficulty or overload execution.

“I want my kids to go out there and execute. I’m not really interested in whether they have the most difficult routines, because at the end of the day, you build confidence through consistency. Success is a process. They may have some basic elements and routines, but they’re going to be done well, and they’re going to build their confidence through that.”

The pillars of the Blantons’ principles were formed when they coached in Great Britain’s national team system. Nick’s gymnastics career saw him compete collegiately for four years at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Va.

Nancy, the Fundy Gymnastics Club gym director, is a former gymnast with the British national team. The two met while working at a gymnastics camp in Pennsylvania and eventually brought their philosophies north of the border.

Having the Fundy club well represented at the Canada Games is a testament to the hard work of the Blantons and their staff.

“It’s pretty significant,” Nick said. “With six kids and two alternates, that’s the most of any club within our province. Last year, we were fortunate enough to put in an expansion (on the gym in Quispamsis) and I guess we’re reaping those benefits right now.

“The expansion was put in not only to increase our participation numbers, but it was also put in so that these athletes have a chance, and the chance has obviously come to fruition now. We’re really fortunate and it’s a really big step for the club.”

Although MacMaster has already competed in regional meets, he's excited to take his skills to the national stage.

"I think it's going to be pretty fun and exciting," he said about the Canada Games. "It's a pretty cool experience for the whole gym to have people going for them and representing this club at the Canada Games. I think it's going to be a really good time."

No matter the level of the gymnast, the Blantons want their athletes to learn more than just execution of skills. The club includes 100 athletes in the competitive program and 550 in the recreational program. Aside from the Blantons, there are two other full-time employees and 20 part-time employees.

"Probably the most important (principle) is to be realistic with their expectations," Nick said. "It's not all about medals and number-one placements. It's very important to understand that sport teaches you a lot deeper things than just a medal."

"We're very realistic about expectations. There are no guarantees in sport, but what we can guarantee is that it's going to be a healthy atmosphere, it's going to be positive and kids are going to have a chance. There's definitely not an entitlement in here. You are a part of a program, and you get out of it what you put into it."

"I'm real with the kids," continued the coach. "I'm just going to let them know that hard work can take you to this route or that route. Hard work beats talent if talent doesn't work hard. Pretty much every single kid in here understands that. The options are presented to them, but they're not presented to them in a manner that's a guarantee."

The kids enrolled in the competitive program are asked to complete a goal sheet. And what appears on that goal sheet is taken very seriously.

"If I ever see that the Olympics is their goal, I immediately sit down with the family," Nick said. "They see the Olympics as some sort of icing on the cake, they see it as some sort of happy fantasy land. What they don't really understand and appreciate is the amount of sacrifices that they're going to put into that."

"For the family, both financially and the compromises on their own lives, it's huge. I'm fortunate enough to have met quite a few Olympians from my past work experience to know what they've gone through. It's important to make sure it's realistic for the kids so that they understand those expectations."

Nancy said the recent Canada Games selection process is an emotional time for both the athletes and coaches.

"Before we went into the process, we were very honest with the kids," she said. "We didn't build up their expectations to the point where they all thought they were going to make it. We kept it realistic for them. If you're going to compete, the children have to learn that you're not always going to win or get a prize every time."

The Canada Games isn't the only big event on the gymnastics calendar. The provincials will be held in late March in Fredericton, while the Atlantic championships will be April 24 and 25 at Saint John's Trade and Convention Centre. Two weeks later, the Eastern championships will be hosted by Moncton.

“The Canada Games is going to be the highlight of the season for the athletes who are going, but after that, there are still other things that are important,” Nancy said.

Nick said the athletes representing the Fundy Gymnastics Club benefit from a team effort.

“We need the support of our staff and the support of the parents,” he said. “That support is tremendous in this (process). Nancy and I are only two people on a team of individuals who have produced these kids. The more that we get that support rolling and get everybody on board, the better these kids have a chance to fulfill their goals.”