

Level 6 Report – Derek Zalaski

Here is a brief reflection on some of my experiences and events that took place at the Hockey Canada Level VI Seminar in Saskatoon from November 5-9, 2003.

Day One – Wednesday, November 5th

After a night of packing, vigorous rule cramming, and chatting on the phone with fellow officials wishing me well, my day started early at 4:30 am. Although I was working on about three hours of sleep, the excitement of what was about to take place the next five days sparked my adrenaline and woke me up pretty quick. "I have to be at the airport at what time?" kept ringing through my head hardly believing that we had to take a 6:00 am flight to Calgary, change planes and then fly to Saskatoon. Gerard Rajotte, Doris Wyss, and I traveled to Calgary and we all shared the same sense of anticipation. We met up with two other officials at the Calgary airport, Mark MacIsaac from Calgary and Darelle Mitchell from Vancouver and you could tell that the camaraderie was starting because we were all worried about the SRD exam.

When we arrived in Saskatoon, we had some officials waiting for us at the airport who transported us to the hotel. My roommate from Brandon, Manitoba hadn't checked in yet so I was very excited to have my choice of beds, especially because the other bed was a pullout couch. I found out later that the couch was the more comfortable bed. A few of us made our way down to the hotel restaurant to grab some lunch. After a while more people started to filter in and several of the officials from eastern Canada joined us. We started talking and instantly had stories to share about how things operated in our different regions. You could tell it was going to be a great time because everybody was very friendly despite a sense of hesitation about the rigors that we were about to face over the next few days.

We started the camp at 1:00 pm where we went through an introduction session and had the outline of the agenda. Everybody had to referee one hockey game when they were there and some people were traveling as far as three hours away to get to their games so the evenings were left open to us if we were not working a game. We had a couple of speeches regarding expectations and did some goal setting and also reviewed what type of assignments some of the past Level VI attendees had received in the last couple of years. In the evening, I met with three other officials and we decided to hold a study session for a couple of hours and reviewed the rulebook as well as some of the past SRD exams. Later in the evening, we went up to the hospitality room that was provided compliments of the Western Hockey League. This was a time to bond with some of the other officials but I decided to call it an early night because I knew of the daunting day that was ahead of us tomorrow.

Day Two – Thursday, November 6th

I can't believe my alarm clock is ringing at 6:00 am! Before I arrived in Saskatoon, I had talked to some of the past attendees of the Level VI Seminar and they made me fully aware that the organizers like to do things early at the camp but when you are actually staring at the clock early in the morning, it is not very fun. I am normally a breakfast guy but nothing was open at that time in the morning so I had nothing to eat besides a banana I had borrowed from one of the guys. I felt a bit anxious because I am normally in good shape but I had no expectation of what

the other participants were capable of and wasn't sure if I would be good, bad, or just plain ugly when it came to the fitness testing. I had a calm, confident feeling either because it was way too early in the morning to be really nervous, or it was my familiarity with this scenario because of my participation previously at the Alberta Development Camp, the Level IV/V camps, and the Western Hockey League training camps. We were shuttled to a field house and engaged in the two-mile run first. Many people were complaining about the dry air in the facility and I felt like I was going to die after the run was done but it was worth it because I felt I put forth my best possible effort. We continued on to the University where we went through the ringer by doing fat tests, stepped on the weigh scale, and had our height measured. We broke into 3 groups and rotated through doing push-ups, chin-ups, flexibility testing, grip strength testing, and partial curl-ups. It was nice to see how everyone was cheering for each other.

After the physical testing, we were shuttled back to the hotel and had a quick bite to eat. A guest speaker came in, Mr. Kevin Dickie, formerly head coach of the Saskatoon Blades. He posed some interesting questions and gave insight from a coach's perspective towards various topics. He raised some good discussion and tried to learn from us as much as we were trying to learn from him. After a quick lunch we were back with our next guest speaker. Mr. Dave Smith is the NHL Officials Fitness and Conditioning Coordinator and he gave some insight into what it takes physically to be a top level official. He talked about eating habits, body fat percentages, and how fitness correlated with playoff assignments in the NHL. I am pretty sure everybody in the room was paying attention for the next speaker because it was Mr. Andy Van Hellemond, Director of Officiating for the NHL. He talked about the number of officials on staff, what the NHL is doing to scout new officials, and went through things such as the pay structure. It seemed surreal to have a hall of fame official and the top dog in the top league in the world talking to us and characterizing us as elite officials. It was a memorable time.

We then grabbed our refereeing gear and shuttled off to the rink at the University where Dave Smith ran a power skating session with Andy Van Hellemond, Maurice Roy, and all of the Referee-in-Chiefs looking on. There was a crew from the local news station interviewing several of the participants and instructors for a local news story. After the ice session, we bolted back to the hotel where we had a session with Dr. Maurice Roy where he reviewed all the national and international opportunities that were available. He also went over a little bit of the history of the last Level VI Seminar participants and some of the assignments they had received within the last two years.

During the evening, we dressed up in our suits and ties and attended what is called "Branch Night" at a local golf course. It was a banquet atmosphere and we ate some incredible food as well as acknowledged all the hard work of the volunteers that made an event such as this possible. At the end of the evening, we were all presented with watches that had the Hockey Canada logo on the face and our names inscribed on the back. What a treasured gift!

Day Three - Friday, November 7th

I thought 6:00 am was early. When the alarm clock went off at 5:30 am this morning, it was brutal (especially when it is only 4:30 am in Alberta). We headed off to the skating tests at Saskatchewan Place and got dressed in our uniforms to have a picture session as a whole group. We warmed up and went right into the skating tests enduring the front 40 metres, backwards 40

metres, circle skate, and 3 laps. We came back from the rink, had some breakfast, and then got into some group work with Mr. Doug Hayward. We split into four groups and discussed different scenarios that may come up with high level officials. This activity posed some very interesting discussion. After that, we had the Kinesiology department come in from the University of Saskatchewan to discuss the fitness results, what they meant, and where we should be for our age group. We broke for a quick lunch and then discussed any potential rule changes or procedure changes that we thought might be beneficial for upcoming seasons. We had various senior officials from all over the country brainstorming on how we could make our great game even greater.

After the day was done, I decided to head over to watch the Prince Albert Raiders vs. Saskatoon Blades over at Saskatchewan Place. Yes, I knew the exam was the next morning but I wanted to scout out the game as I was officiating the Saskatoon Blades the next day and if I didn't know the rules by now, I would never know them. It was great to go and watch some hockey from the stands. I also had an opportunity to interact with Martin Reichart, who was the delegate from Germany. We had a chance to discuss the differences on how the game is played in our different countries. He particularly found the girls in the hot tub at Saskatchewan Place very interesting and decided he was going to suggest they implement that in Germany.

Day Four - Saturday, November 8th

After studying into the night, I decided to get three hours of sleep. At 7:30 am, we ate breakfast and then got down and dirty. 60 SRD questions in 60 minutes. It was a very difficult exam and when it was done, there was a great feeling of satisfaction. We then had an opportunity to pose questions to every Referee-in-Chief in a "hot stove session". Some of the discussion was regarding the differences across the country and outlined the barriers that we face as officials. After that we had lunch followed by a wrap up session. Mr. Greg Johnson was the official photographer of the camp and followed us around to every event capturing every moment he could. Greg put together a slide show of the camp at the end and played it all to us at the end with accompanying music. It was very special to reflect upon the time we had. Every day was like Christmas as we received equipment and clothing every day of the camp. This generous action truly made us feel like elite officials.

After getting some final pictures in, I departed for my bed to rest before my game assignment that night. I had the Kootenay Ice vs. the Saskatoon Blades with Mr. Doug Hayward supervising me. I always thought I would feel pressure in this situation but all of the games and the development that I have done prepared me for this moment and I was equipped to perform when it was necessary. Besides my jock strap busting during the second period, the game went off without a hitch and I received some valuable feedback from Mr. Hayward. Saturday night was a time to reflect upon our camp and socialize with our peers for one last time.

Day Five - Sunday, November 9th

When 9:00 am came the next morning, I hopped out of bed and packed the rest of my belongings, said goodbye to my roommate, and headed to the lobby. Everyone was extremely exhausted when we headed home. When I stepped on the Edmonton soil, I felt proud of my accomplishment and truly satisfied that I had experienced something special.