



An Interview with Mick Pyznarski: Chicago Stallions Hockey Director

The next time you're at the Stallions locker room at MB, take a minute to look around. It is undoubtedly an impressive space filled with team spirit, a heart-pumping rally cry and a space that demonstrates the respect for the game and our players. But what you may not have noticed is the plaque with the number 21 and the American flag with it. It is a plaque that honors our hockey director's son Scottie, who is currently stationed at Fort Leonard Wood Military Base in Missouri.

Q: Mick, you have a very rich hockey history with the Stallions and Saddle & Cycle. When did it all begin?

A: I started off coaching here by accident actually. I was playing college hockey and my coach, John Apter, was the director at Saddle & Cycle at the time. *(His son, Bob Apter, is currently the President of NIHL.)* John asked me if I would like to coach and I said yes. Obviously, since then there have been several other hockey directors, including Kevin Mann who ran some of the Blues teams through here. After Kevin started the Mission I became the hockey director here in the late 1990's.

I have made some of my closest friendships through the game of hockey. I just had breakfast with these guys (pointing to coaches Rick Block and Keith Tracy) on Monday.

Coincidentally Rick Block and Keith Tracy have been coaching for Mick for 25 and 23 years respectively, which speaks volumes about the loyalty these two have to our hockey director.

Q: 3on3 is coming up in a couple of months, a program you developed over 15 years ago. How did that all begin?

A: I was looking for something youth hockey players could do after the regular season ends that would allow them to continue to develop their skills in an environment that felt fun. Something that would let them try out new positions and score some goals. The one thing that all hockey players enjoy doing is scoring a goal, especially at the Mite level. 3on3 does that for the kids.

No 3on3 player is assigned a position, and that's on purpose. They're not named teams, and that's also on purpose. Each player gets a ton of ice time, lots of puck touches, and a few goals under the belt.

Interesting fact: The 3on3 program was the first of its kind in Chicago and continues to be a favorite among youth hockey players. Even former Chicago-native NHL player Conor Allen has participated in Mick's 3on3.

Q: This has obviously been an important year for the Stallions with signing our lease to be a premier tenant at the MB Ice Arena.

A: I am very happy about the new partnership the Stallions was with both MB and TPD. These relationships help show our families how our program is growing and expanding. I'm especially happy because I think we share a similar play development philosophy with the Blackhawks and TPD, and having access to a state-of-the-art facility helps impact more kids positively in the city of Chicago. I think this year has shown, however, that no matter how much we grow, we will never not put players' development first. We will always and operate in a way that continues to protect our players' love for the game of hockey.

Q: As you know, sometimes in the second half of a season players can start to get burned out. What advice do you have of parents of players who are starting to get burnt out?

A: Give them as much rest as possible in-between practices and games. Too much skating is not a good thing. Kids need their down time.

Q: It seems like you have a fondness for Mite hockey. Obviously as a hockey director, your Mite program is important, but beyond that it seems like you also really enjoy hockey at the Mite level.

A: I do. It's the start of their careers. I also spend a lot of time with our Mite players because it's important to me to make sure we're developing them properly. Did you know there are 21 steps in the development of a youth hockey player? If they miss one of these steps it is very hard to recover. At the Mite level, if a player develops a bad habit early in their career that doesn't get corrected right away, it can take a long time to get them out of it.

Q: What advice do you have for the parents of players who are getting ready to become Mites?

A: I have two pieces of advice:

- 1) Be patient and let your kid develop. Don't force the issue.
- 2) While you don't want to force you child, it's important to also recognize that hockey is a commitment. It's just as important to be at the practices as it is the games.

Q: Let's talk for a moment about hockey equipment and the importance of making sure gear is properly fitted. As a dad of a former youth hockey player, a coach and a director of a program, you've probably seen it all. What advice can you give us on making sure our players are fitted properly?

A: There are a couple of things I think are important:

- ✓ Don't get a heavy chest pad, especially if you have a younger skater. Equipment should always be protective, but it also shouldn't be weighing players down.
- ✓ Check the blades on your players skates weekly. When you run your finger over the blade, the edges should be smooth from the top to the bottom. If you are wondering if you should have your players skates sharpened, ask a coach. They can take a look at the skates and let you know. It really only takes one nick from them to start wiping out as they're trying to turn on the ice.
 - Knowing how often you need to get your skates sharpened depends on a lot of things, but putting blade protectors on the skates helps keep them smooth longer.
- ✓ Hockey pants: If your player's hockey pants do not go all the way down to the top of their knee pads, and even a little over, it's time to get a new pair. You do not want any opening between the knee pad and the shorts.

Keith Tracy: Shin pads are another one to look out for. They need to cover from the top of the ankle to over the knee. If the shin pad isn't covering the top of the ankle or the top of the knee anymore, it's time for a new pair.

Q: We have been hearing a lot this year about the flex on hockey sticks. What's your take on flex?

A: When it comes to older players, the flex a player uses is more about their individual preference for shooting a puck. For younger players, it's really about matching the correct shaft that they can grip with the right blade. I think the Raven does a good job of that. I know Daniel Carcillo has been recommending it to some of our players as well.

Q: You spend a lot of time in your car, driving to practices, games and tournaments. What tunes are you spinning in your hockey mobile? Is it all ACDC all the time, Barry Manilow, or the Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 in C Minor for the Stallions hockey director?

A: Ha. No. It's strictly country. I like all country, but especially Tim McGraw, Kenney Chesney, Alan Jackson, George Strait. I listen to a lot of it; I spend anywhere from 17,000-30,000 miles driving during the hockey season.

When I'm not listening to country music, I'm talking to my coaches. I like to have them report in after practices and games so we can talk through what they're seeing.

Rick Block: No kidding. This guy sometimes keeps me on the phone talking hockey from the minute I get into my car after a game until I get home. We might even hang up and five minutes later he's calling back with another thought or comment.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to share with your Stallions families?

A: Yeah there is. I want all of our parents to know that if they ever have a question or want to talk about anything related to the program, that I'm happy to talk to them. I'm at the rink almost every day we have a practice. You can usually find me at the glass down by the Zamboni, or sometimes at the Winter Casino sitting with the other coaches in between practices.