

Dufferin-Caledon athletes supported on their Quest for Gold

Written By ROBERT BELARDI

Athletes from Dufferin-Caledon received support from Ontario's latest Quest for Gold program according to MPP, Sylvia Jones' news release on September 14th.

The Ontario government is providing \$6.36 million to 1,438 athletes across Ontario seeking to further pursue young professional careers nationally and internationally.

"I am proud to announce, that, this year, the Ontario government is supporting 15 local athletes from Dufferin-Caledon in their Quest for Gold," Jones wrote in the release.

These 15-athletes will receive funds that will support further training and living expenses.

These athletes include Rachael Anderson (Freestyle Ski), Robert Armstrong (Sledge hockey), Erik Arruda (Gymnastics/Trampoline), Khamica Bingham (Athletics), Cougar Collins (Golf), Renee Foessel (Paralympic Athletics), Lucas Hammond (Rugby), Isaac Heslinga (Volleyball), Cyanne John (Basketball), Ashley Lawrence (Soccer), Michael McCannel (Lacrosse), Max Moffatt (Freestyle Ski), Marko Stojadinovic (Soccer), Sara Villani (Bobsleigh) and Izabella Zingaro (Basketball).

"I was selected as a member of Canadian National Youth Soccer Team for Under 15 last year and participated in the international competition in the CONCACAF soccer region. I am also a member of the Toronto FC academy and a future pro prospect," said Stojadinovic, in his response to The Citizen via Instagram.

"It feels great to be recognized, because it confirms all of the hard work and dedication I've put in over the years. Since I was young, becoming a professional soccer player was my dream and this is just another small step along the journey."

The Caledon native, began playing soccer in the town at the age of three, before joining Brampton's youth club and later, joining Woodbridge SC. He was scouted with Woodbridge to Toronto FC.

Stojadinovic, was nominated by the Ontario Soccer Association. To qualify for the Quest For Gold program, he met specific standards such as, being a part of the national team in your sport.

If there are too many nominees, Stojadinovic said, the players are ranked and, on that judgment, can qualify for gold.

Another Caledon starlet that is honoured and excited to be a part of the program is 17-year-old centre for Caledon Basketball Academy and Team Canada, Izabella Zingaro.

"I am honoured to be nominated and then selected for the Quest for Gold program. This is going to be my third year receiving it and it makes me feel like I've achieved greatness in a sport that I love to play," Zingaro said, in her response, also via Instagram to The Citizen.

"I've already committed to the D1 University of Iowa State on a full scholarship for the 2021 graduating class. This program not only helps with identifying my potential but it also provides me with the extra resources that I require for that level."

This is the third time Zingaro has received Quest for Gold. She received it once for Ontario and this year is her second time receiving it with Canada.

Zingaro, helped Canada finish fifth at the U-17 National Championships last year, averaging 18.2 minutes, 9.4 points and 5.4

rebounds a game.

Isaac Heslinga began his volleyball career in elementary school through a school-based team, later going on to join A.C.T.S Elite based in Dufferin-Peel.

"That's kind of where my passion for volleyball started," said Heslinga.

From there he went on to play with the Aurora Storm, where the team he played for placed fourth in Provincials and later won Division I Nationals in Edmonton. He was later selected for the U16 Youth National Team, and in January 2019 was selected to play on the Team Ontario Elite "consisting of the best players in Ontario. Part of the 2020 Team Ontario Elite, Heslinga planned to go to Poland for a national tournament which was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Heslinga now plays for the University of Alberta.

As a lacrosse player, Mike McCannell, made his way up through Orangeville Minor Lacrosse system, going from Junior B to Junior A. In 2016, playing with the Orangeville Northmen they won the Founders Cup and Team Ontario Field Championship. A senior in university, McCannell for the last four years has played at Stony Brook University, a Division I institution in New York. Last year, McCannell with the Orangeville Northmen won the 2019 Minto Cup in British Columbia.

"It was a pretty amazing, a childhood dream of mine," said McCannell.

The Ontario government for 2020 has provided \$6.36 million to directly financially assist 1,438 high-performance athletes. Financial assistance consists of offsetting costs of training, living expenses such as rent, cost to attend training camps, equipment, and tuition or education expenses.

With the numerous tournaments Heslinga says that it can become costly, and that the funding is a relief from those expenses.

"It definitely adds up when you add club, provincial, and national team," said Heslinga.

The cost benefit of the program was also echoed by McCannell.

"It's a really nice opportunity that if you can apply and get selected, you get payment to go towards your schooling, housing and anything related to your sport," said McCannell. "Which is a really big deal."

Previous recipients of the Quest for Gold program include past Olympic Medalists Penny Olesksiak, Andre De Grasse, and Gabrielle Daleman. From the 2018 Pyeong Chang Olympics and Paralympics, 34 of the 43 Ontario athletes that medaled were Quest for Gold athletes.

"It's a big opportunity that you got to take advantage of and make the most of it because it can help you develop as a player," said McCannell.

- with files from Paula Brown, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter