

Orangeville man provides free sports equipment to thousands of local families

By Sam Odrowski

Purchasing sports equipment for children and youth can be financially draining, especially when they're growing out of the equipment year after year. It can also be a big risk for parents to purchase gear for a sport that their child has never tried, and may not want to pursue.

But, an Orangeville man is donating his time and resources to fix this problem.

Brian Hooper, who owns and runs Hooper's Skate Sharpening, takes in donations of used equipment, refurbishes it as needed, and gives it to families in need.

He's been helping outfit kids to play sports since he started his business decades ago. However, in the last six years, the charitable effort has taken off, with a steady flow of donations coming in and flowing back out into the community.

He now provides several hundred pieces of equipment to kids per year. In 2024, he's already donated 300 skates, and each pair comes with a complimentary sharpen.

While he primarily takes in hockey equipment, he also receives gear for lacrosse, baseball, soccer, golf, and snow sports.

Since starting the initiative, he's outfitted thousands of kids, who otherwise might not have had the chance to play minor sports ? all at no cost.

?People don't realize that set of shoulder pads for two boys [to play hockey] and a set of pants, that's easily \$600 that parents would pay in the store for those four things,? Hooper said. ?That's \$600 they now can pay put towards something else.?

Hooper's commitment to the local sports community goes beyond sorting and refurbishing equipment for children looking to play sports. He provides free skate sharpening with each pair of donated skates he finds a new home for. If he charged for each pair that was given out, he'd have thousands of dollars in profit, but instead, he ensures there are zero barriers to getting kids out on the ice.

He also keeps his skate-sharpening costs low.

Until July of this year, he only charged \$5 per pair of skates, but he's had to up it to \$8 a pair to cover rising costs.

?It's the first time in 20 years that I've had to go above \$5,? Hooper said. ?My sharpening stones have gone up by more than a third [in price] in the last two years. My power bill has gone up huge.?

Typically, most skate sharpening places charge \$10 to \$14.

Hooper also helps with skating programs at local schools.

When children don't have skates or helmets for an outing with their class, the school calls Hooper and lets him know what sizes are needed. He then sharpens the skates, finds the correct sizes of helmets and puts them in a bin for a teacher to pick up.

Much of Hooper's efforts beyond refitting equipment, such as helping run youth programs, are supported by monetary donations from people or organizations in the community. However, in the past, he had to cover some costs out of pocket.

But Hooper's largest cost is his time.

Since the middle of August, he has spent two to five hours accepting donations, sorting them, repairing items as needed, and redistributing. On the weekends he easily spends eight hours a day or more.

?It has its moments where the days can be long, but if you look at the smiling faces of the kids that leave here to play sports, it helps to recharge my batteries,? Hooper said. ?I also supply teach at schools almost every day and in almost every class from kindergarten to Grade 12 I go to I meet kids that know me through the equipment program.?

He added, ?It usually makes my day easier when I get into class and they know me. They are usually the first ones to pay attention and make sure the others do as well.?

Hooper has just two rules when kids receive equipment from him.

?They need to show love and respect to their parents or the person that brought them to Hoopers because they obviously care about you and deserve it,? he said.

The second rule is, ?I want them to try hard in school. Not in the way they think though. It's not about As and Bs, even though that's good as well, but it's about being a good person in school, being a positive leader in class. Have pride in their school and be the person that steps up when a classmate needs help with work and if they need a friend. Be the reason why someone's day is a better one. That's it. If they do that, then they are welcome to take anything that fits and play sports.?

Not only does Hooper's free equipment swap help kids in need, but it also has a positive impact on the environment.

?A lot of this equipment would go into a garbage if people didn't know where to put it,? he said.

Hooper encourages anyone with equipment sitting in their home, to drop it off to him so it can be used by others.

?It doesn't cost you anything to do it. You've already spent the money on the equipment,? he said. ?If you've got equipment sitting in a garage gathering dust, drop it off. It makes no sense to keep it.?

Hooper only asks that the equipment is of decent quality and can be used as is or for parts.

He'd encourage anyone in need of equipment to stop by Hooper's Skate Sharpening.

?There's no pressure. If it's here and it fits, it's yours,? he said. ?I'd rather have an empty garage and be able to say all the equipment that was donated here is being used. Every piece of equipment is potentially giving the opportunity to another kid to play a sport.?

Inquiries for the equipment primarily come through his Hooper's Skate Sharpening Facebook Page, which now has over 1,700 followers. Hooper can also be reached through email at Hooperssharpening@gmail.com for anyone who would like to donate or receive equipment.

At the moment, he could outfit up to 60 kids for hockey but has around 150 pairs of skates. Hooper's stock of hockey helmets, gloves and elbow pads is currently low, so those donations will help him provide more full sets of hockey equipment to anyone in need.