

Inclusive Ice Hockey

THE GREAT BLIZZARDS OF MASSACHUSETTS UNITE FOR A SPECIAL EXPERIENCE

By, Julie Dillon

Kingston, if you have ever had the pleasure of lacing up skates and being in a cold rink first thing in the morning, then you know the joys of being a hockey parent. Watching your kid out on the ice, skating his or her heart out, is a feeling like no other. If you know, you know; there is nothing better. Every child and parent deserves to have that very same experience.

Coach Steve Nearms is making sure that there is an opportunity for all players to get out on the ice and have that amazing experience. He has created an inclusive ice hockey team that stands by the motto **"No Hockey Player Left Behind."**

The Great Blizzards of Massachusetts special hockey team, better known as the Great Blizz, is an ice hockey team for people ages four and up who cannot play on any other team due to cognitive, intellectual, and/or developmental disabilities.

"One team with two locations: Kingston and South Dennis. The program was just exploding, and we never want to leave anyone out," shared Steve. "The Great Blizz season goes from September to May, and the players love every minute of it."

Coach Nearms has an autistic son who played ice hockey in Northern Virginia for years before the family moved to Plymouth in 2017. There were no teams on the South Shore for those with special needs, so Coach Nearms incorporated the Great Blizz in 2018, and they had their first practice at



Coach Steve Nearms





the Bog Ice Arena right here in Kingston in September 2019. The South Dennis program began in September of this past year, and between the two locations, the Great Blizz is proud to have sixty players. Coach Nearms shared that recently for the first time, both locations played together as one team, against Rhode Island Special Hockey and it was a great success.

"My son was the motivation to start The Great Blizz, and so many people in our community have benefitted," said Steve.

Steve said the hockey community has been nothing but supportive of The Great Blizz.

"I was surprised when we started up the team how willing the hockey community was to get us off the ground and help us thrive. At the beginning, we put an extra large donation box at the Bog, and it was filled every couple of days with gear. Some of it was brand new! We've had many very successful Boston Bruins alumni benefit games. Local citizens and companies have been generous sponsors so we can fulfill our mission of providing hockey to the community," said Steve.

The Great Blizz believes in teaching the game of hockey to interested players while also imparting important life skills, soft skills, and even business skills to all who hit the ice under their watch.

"Following instructions on the ice promotes teamwork, sportsmanship, hard work, discipline, and respect for others," shared Coach Nearms.

The Great Blizz is a perfect opportunity for any level of player. At practices, you will see the teams separated into three sections. Those players who are beginners will be on one side, learning how to skate. The group in the middle comprises players who are a bit more advanced, and finally, the last group allows the most advanced and experienced players to enhance their hockey skills. In each group are volunteer coaches and players, which allows for lots of one-on-one attention and help for any player who needs it. Coach Nearms told me that even other hockey teams help out the Great Blizz. The Quincy College hockey team and the Duxbury girls team come down for some practices and help support the team on the ice. Most recently the Bridgewater Bandits joined the Great Blizz on the ice to lend their support as well.

Coach Nearms shared that it is so important for him to provide every opportunity for his team that all the other youth programs offer to their players. This means weekly practices and the opportunity to go to tournaments and play games. When I had the pleasure of speaking with Coach Nearms, the Great



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Blizz was headed to Chicago with fifteen players for a USA Special Classic Hockey tournament. The team also has an upcoming tournament in Ocean City, MD, where a dozen players will go for a three-day, four-game tournament in the lobby of a resort hotel on the oceanfront.

"The trips are the cool part, and these players get the same fun experience as all other hockey players. Staying in a hotel with your teammates is a blast and creates unforgettable memories," shared Coach Nearms. "Our coaches, assistant coaches, players, and their parents or guardians are constant inspiration, and it motivates all who are involved to work hard on this team. When I see how proud our coaches and parents/guardians are watching our players gel as a team, I know it's a success. Seeing a player do something that neither they nor their parents or guardians ever thought possible is one of the most amazing feelings in the world."

Lindsey Andrews, a Kingston resident, shared with me that her son Ben is in his first year with the Great Blizz, and the experience so far has been wonderful. "The coaching staff and support are exceptional! Watching Ben gain confidence and skills under their guidance has been amazing! We can't wait to see what the rest of the season brings," said Lindsey.

Coach Jim Coffey has been helping out with the Great Blizz for about five years and he takes great pride in the work he

does with the team. Coach Coffey is the head coach on the ice and he makes sure that there is a one-to-one ratio with the learn-to-skate players. He coordinates special drills that are designed to each player's specific needs. "I walked into the Great Blizzards backward but this program has brought great joy to my life. It always impresses me how much these players want to help each other out and how they are so eager to participate in teamwork," shared Coach Coffey.

Coach Nearms shared with me that when you do good, you feel good! The sky's the limit for the growth of the program, they have equipment for players to borrow, and anyone of any age, gender, and playing ability is welcome.

"The value of the program is beyond anything you could imagine on the face of it," said Steve. "Come volunteer with The Great Blizz on and off the ice. And if you know somebody with special needs ages 4 and older, then tell them about The Great Blizz; we would love to have them,"

You can check out The Great Blizz on Facebook by searching The Great Blizzards of Massachusetts Special Hockey Inc. or @thegreatblizz.

Please visit the webpage online at www.thegreatblizz.org or contact Coach Steve Nearms directly by phone at 703-587-4321 or by email at coachnearms@thegreatblizz.org.






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