

Mean fists, warm heart

His job description doesn't lend many to think

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Matt Carkner, left, has been a physical presence for the Senators on the blue-line in his first full season as a regular NHL player where he ranks third in the league with 19 fights. The defenceman is helping to provide hockey equipment to the Capital City Condors.

Photograph by: Jean Levac, The Ottawa Citizen, The Ottawa Citizen

he could be a Mr. Nice Guy, but Senators enforcer Matt Carkner is no stranger to serving his community, reports Ken Warren.

A team of special hockey players will receive a surprise appearance and gift from Ottawa Senators tough guy Matt Carkner Saturday afternoon.

Carkner will bring a carload of new equipment -- skates, gloves, sticks-- to the Capital City Condors, a group of 27 children with developmental difficulties from Gatineau to Greely, who play hockey weekly at the Kinburn Sensplex.

The Senators defenceman enlisted the support of equipment sponsors to help with the donation, estimated to be in the \$3,000 to \$4,000 range.

"I usually try to do a few things, get involved with some charity events during the season, but this year it has taken a little while to get things set up, because it has been a little bit crazy," said Carkner, a native of Winchester.

Carkner has been honoured in the past for his off-ice contributions. While with the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins in 2006-07, he won the Yanick Dupre Memorial Award, presented to the American Hockey League player showcasing the greatest service to the his local community.

His life as a career minor league player took a turn for the better when he cracked the Senators lineup

out of training camp, becoming a key part of the team's defence due to his toughness and leadership. He ranks third in the NHL with 19 fights and is one of four players to have skated in all 63 games this season.

He has been looking for a way to get involved in a worthwhile community cause in Ottawa and through mutual connections, he hooked up with Jim Perkins, a pastor at the Mercy Community Church. Perkins also serves as president and jack-of-all-trades for the Condors, now in their second year of existence.

Many of the Condors players have autism or suffer from other special needs, which doesn't allow them to play in traditional organized leagues. Perkins says the Condors provides them with their own outlet to develop skills. The players, he says, are ecstatic as they look forward to playing against other special needs children at a tournament in Orangeville in March.

"It's great listening to the kids," Perkins said.

"This is their tournament, not a tournament for their brother or sister. The kids are so unique and these really are special families, but the financial demand on these families is unbelievable."

Carkner appreciates how expensive organized minor hockey has become and wanted to provide the equipment that was most in demand and is planning on continuing to help as the program grows.

"My dream is for this to grow into three teams, to cut down on the travel," says Perkins. "One team in Gatineau, another one somewhere in the east end."

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