

Power to Choose connects with students

By JEFF TRIBE
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Mano Watsa couldn't have scripted the outing any better if he had tried.

His Power To Choose team had fallen behind 5-0 to the Glendale 'Selects' after a round of dodge ball and then 10-0 following the tug-of-war competition.

The early stages of the basketball competition hadn't gone their way either, Glendale's Adam Carswell banking home a wild 16-foot shot that looked a lot like it came from the right hand of a wrestler. John Adgoy added fuel to the home team's fire with back-to-back three-pointers that Watsa, a two-time All-Canadian basketball player with the University of Waterloo Warriors had a great opportunity to admire, seeing as they both had been in his 'face'.

Admittedly, the early deficit/comeback combination followed the loose gameplan used by the Power To Choose all-stars.

"I get excited when they start hitting big shots," smiled Watsa. "That makes the show even better."

There are times when they're playing Grade 7 and 8 students the 'script' even includes a tight loss at the buzzer, to players who are as a result, 'pumped up' but still gracious.

"They're like, 'good luck next time,'" Watsa smiled.

Thursday at Glendale, Watsa and company did manage to overcome a significant deficit. That it was capped at the buzzer, by a monstrous two-handed Rob Duffey "thun-

der-dunk' was simply icing on the cake.

"That's why people like him so much," Watsa laughed.

Thursday's program went as close to perfectly as Watsa could have hoped. But as he pointed out, life doesn't always work out that way.

Watching the ease with which he navigates all aspects of a basketball court or masterfully 'works' a high school crowd, it would be easy to imagine his has.

But in between the hoopla of the competitions, Watsa took time out to introduce the student body to a younger, much shyer version of himself who faced a serious struggle simply stringing a cohesive sentence together.

Watsa's polished presentation today bears no trace of the serious speech impediment he faced, and through a long and at times painful struggle, managed to master.

Watching Duffey's 'rim-wrecker', or hearing how he had been a top-10 sprinter in Canada, it would also be easy to imagine his life had been one easy ride.

But in a quiet, sincere speech, he related how he had been informed via a phone call during his early university years that

one of his best friends had been killed after accepting a ride from a drunk driver.

And while their obvious athletic talents are the 'hook' that opens the door with the students, it is the fact they too have personal challenges that says Watsa, makes the truer connection.

Not all of the students they meet will go on to have the kind of athletic success the

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Mano Watsa

Power To Choose 'team' has Watsa points out, "but they're all facing challenges and obstacles. "Students can relate a lot more to our struggles and challenges and our failures."

Watsa's inherent message is that each one of them has the power to choose a productive path over and around challenges all will face and with commitment, determination and a positive attitude, each can be successful.

It's a message he firmly believes in himself. Watsa, who graduated from the University of Waterloo with a degree in recreation, leisure and business, toured the United States and overseas with Athletes in Action, a Christian-based professional sports outreach before forming

his own organization.

His Power To Choose entourage (Watsa and a varying supporting cast chosen from a 15-member broader 'team' depending on location) visits around 100 schools annually and has spoken to a cumulative audience of over 15,000 students.

While Watsa is personally Christian-based, his 'teammates' come from different backgrounds and present a variety of themed programs (respect, choices and perspectives for example) tailored to the individual schools' requests.

Their presentation is limited in time, but students are encouraged to keep in touch via his www.powertochoose.ca website.

It was a busy day in Tillsonburg for Watsa and company, who began with a 'tour stop' at Annandale, had a BBQ lunch at the Upper Deck, 'hit' Glendale early in the afternoon and then closed out a full slate that evening with a charity basketball game against current and former Gemini. But while it's busy, it's a lifestyle Watsa also finds to be very rewarding.

"I really, really enjoy it," he said of the opportunity to act as a positive role model and present a positive message he hopes young people will consider and ultimately, benefit from - while stroking the odd three-pointer or throwing down a two-hander.

"I think that helps build a connection," Watsa concluded. "And hopefully provides the students the opportunity to walk away with something."