

Olympic spirit among N.B. youth

Published Tuesday February 9th, 2010

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There won't be any New Brunswick athletes participating on behalf of Team Canada at the upcoming Winter Olympic Games beginning this weekend in Vancouver.

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submitted photo

Pictured is just a small sampling of the drawings that have been sent to Sport New Brunswick from youngsters across the province as part of a contest aimed at commemorating the Olympic Winter Games scheduled to begin this weekend in Vancouver. Youngsters from kindergarden to Grade 5 were given the opportunity to express the Olympic spirit through their drawings. The contest has attracted an overwhelming response, says Lindsey Sparkes of Sport N.B. Wednesday is the entry deadline.

But that doesn't mean New Brunswickers aren't interested. Lindsey Sparkes of Sport New Brunswick has plenty of evidence to the contrary attached to the walls in her office and sitting on her desk.

Sparkes, who took on the job of communications and events co-ordinator with the association in September, says she's been "blown away" by the response she's gotten to a Sport N.B. initiative aimed at elementary-school youngsters in the province.

Sparkes said she and SNB director Jason Dickson, the former major league pitcher, were discussing in early January possible ways Sport N.B. could commemorate the upcoming two-week festival of sport that was going to take place in Vancouver. Without any provincial athletes to officially "send off" to the Games, Sparkes and Dickson decided they would hold a contest involving youngsters in kindergarden up to and including Grade 5.

They send out a directive to each of the school principals in New Brunswick outlining the parameters of the contest. In effect, the idea was to solicit coloured drawings from the school youngsters depicting their interpretation of the "Olympics and the Olympic spirit," said Sparkes. Contestants would be divided into two age groups: Kindergarden to Grade 2 and Grades 3-5.

Youngsters would have until Wednesday of this week, a "soft" deadline admits Sparkes, to submit their entries. Once they were all in, she and Dickson would go through them and pick out five prize winners in each of the age categories. Main criteria would be "creativity," said Sparkes.

Youngsters could use crayons, magic markers, paint kits, etc. to come up with their Olympic creations. They could draw athletes, mascots, the Olympic torch, whatever she said. "We didn't put any restrictions on it. We wanted them to use their imagination of what they thought was the Olympic spirit."

Sparkes said they were looking for drawings around the 8 1/2 by 11 size, "although we got a lot of 11 by 17 drawings." There's been even been a few computer-generated printouts submitted among the older age group, she says.

Overall, the response has been, in a word, overwhelming.

"We've been completely blown away," says Sparkes, who has been kept busy dealing with the stacks of mail she's receiving on an every-day basis. "We're getting entries in the mail every day. Our walls are covered with these drawings. And I've got a bunch of them on my desk that we're going to have to find room for."

She estimates there's in excess of a thousand entries with more to come. "If we get an entry on Friday, we're not going to ignore it, even though we're saying Wednesday is the deadline. It's a soft deadline as far as we're concerned."

Sparkes said the original intent was to generate interest in sports among the youngsters. "We had no idea what kind of response we'd get," she said.

"We figured we would try out this age group. Maybe the next time (2012 Summer Olympics), we'll get the older age levels involved. We wanted to create an awareness with this, and certainly this proves that people do care about the Olympics and the various athletes even if there aren't any from New Brunswick taking part."

Sparkes says she's received drawings depicting Olympic mascots, the Olympic rings, and any number of athletes from several sports. "We've even got some drawings of a luge, and things like that. A lot of young girls are drawing figure skaters," she says. "Sometimes they'll include a little message."

She says a lot of entries are coming in from smaller schools in communities that people might not be familiar with.

"We've gotten a lot of entries from some of the french schools in the samller areas," she says. "Heck, it's just been a great response, more than we ever thought we'd get."

She says the brightness of the colours is what's really impressive.

"Sometimes you're not going to get the right colours, let's say of the snow. But we were looking for creativity, and that's what we're getting with a lot of these entries."

She says she and Dickson will sit down early next week and decide the various prize winners. "It won't be easy," she says.

Sparkes says the hope is to send either some of the originals or photos of the display to Canadian mission staff members in Vancouver as a way of showing support for the Canadian effort.

