

Walter Gretzky Brings Energy, Humour to Golf Tournament

By John M. Milner

"IF YOU see a white streak in the sky...it's not the Russians, it's not Bin Laden or terrorists. It's not a Canadian missile (gone awry)."

The speaker is Walter Gretzky, father of NHL legend, "the Great One" Wayne Gretzky and a man dubbed "Canada's most famous Dad" by more than one person. He's talking about what people might expect from his golf swing to volunteers at the FireRock Golf Club in Komoka. The occasion is a golf tournament named in his honour: the first annual Walter Gretzky CNIB Golf Classic, held this past Thursday.

Later, Gretzky asks "You know what my handicap is?" The answer: "It's the three guys I golf with."

"I'm not that good of a golfer," Gretzky admits, "I'm not even average but I go just to participate. I'm in the high 90s."

No one playing golf with or just being around Walter Gretzky is immune to his feisty spirit and a sense of energy that would be the envy of a man half his age. With a smile that never left his face, Gretzky charmed everyone he came in contact with.

The Gretzky family has been involved with CNIB's efforts since Wayne was in his late teens. "He met a visually-impaired student in Toronto at the airport one night," Walter remembers, "And he was so impressed with the young student he came home and said 'You know what I should do, Dad? A few of my friends will have a little tennis tournament and raise a few dollars for the CNIB.' And here we are...twenty-five years later and we're still involved with the CNIB and we've raised over three million dollars, all because of that chance meeting with that young lad."

An amazing story, made all the more amazing with a postscript that has the Gretzkys tracking down the young lad, who now lives in Ottawa.

The Gretzkys fund-raising efforts "started with tennis, then we had a baseball game, then we had golf, because we felt more people could be involved that way," Gretzky says "and it's a little more lasting because you have to



WALTER GRETZKY poses beside a sign showing the various sponsors of the CNIB Golf Classic that has been renamed in his honor.

have people to organize it for months ahead of time, as you know, and we felt we'd make more money that way, too, which we have."

Walter says that the best part of being involved with the CNIB is the ability "to help someone else. I have a young man across the road who's totally visually impaired. He's 21 years old and he's been our neighbour all those years. We can relate to him." "People who are visually impaired are just like you and I," Gretzky points out. "They're no different and they want to live the life that you and I live, and we should help them to live that type of

life because, think about it, if you're visually impaired, who's going to give you a job? Where are you going to make money? So we should help our fellow brothers."

With the tournament about to get underway, Gretzky rushes to his cart, waving his cap to the tournament's volunteers and staff, giving a hearty "Yaahoo!" as he rides off towards the first hole. ◆