

FINAL BUZZER



After 10 years coaching Pinellas Sheriff's Police Athletic League (PAL) hockey teams, **Coach Mike Celona** is turning in his clipboard and whistle.

Coach Mike grew up playing hockey in New England until 1980, when he and his parents moved to Florida, where there was no ice hockey at the time. When what is today called the Clearwater Ice Arena opened, Coach Mike intermittently played adult hockey, but his transition from player to coach was initiated by the start of his son, Anthony's hockey career in 2005.

Then a St. Petersburg Police Officer, **Coach Mike** was familiar with the PAL program, and soon after he enrolled Anthony in the Squirr/Peeewe program, he joined the team as an assistant coach in April 2006.

Coach Mike moved from assistant to head coach, and expanded the program to include children ranging from ages 8 to 18 on two separate teams, both of which he coached. Meanwhile, he also managed administrative duties, like payment structure, registrations, and recruiting, and hosted a week-long summer hockey camp.

In addition to his role at PAL, **Coach Mike's** coaching career also included six years with the Tampa Bay Lightning Sled Hockey Team, which is composed of disabled players of all ages, and eight years and running with the Palm Harbor University High School Hurricanes.

Needless to say, **Coach Mike** has spent every Saturday and Sunday at the ice rink from August to June for the last 10 years – and he's got the stats to prove it.

With two Thanksgiving Tournament Championships, five undefeated seasons, 10 players who have advanced to college-level teams, personal receipt of the Tampa Bay Lightning's Community Hero award, and a final record of 262 wins, 47 losses, and 15 ties, **Coach Mike** considers his coaching career a success.

"I truly enjoyed working with kids," **Coach Mike** said. "Watching a young player being able to play on their first game, score their first goal, or just make it through an entire session without falling is just fun to see."

As impressive as his hockey record is, **Coach Mike's** legacy will be in the countless life lessons he instilled in the boys and girls of PAL as a truly exceptional role model.

Although his official duty was to coach hockey teams to victory, **Coach Mike** didn't neglect the opportunity to coach them to success in a much bigger game – life.

"We placed a lot of emphasis on academics and respect, using hockey as building blocks and life lessons," **Coach Mike** said. "I think the biggest challenge is getting young hockey players to look beyond hockey, using the skills and life lessons we teach to develop and grow as a person, not just a hockey player."

