

Sawyer McKenzie missed Wayne Gretzky's talk in the Greatness in Leadership conference Tuesday at the Enmax Centre. As an Oilers fan, he might have wanted to be there to meet The Great One. As a brother, however, Sawyer already embodied most of what Gretzky was talking about.

Following speakers with impressive business acumen in Gabrielle Scrimshaw and Doug Lipp, Gretzky sat down with an old friend—former Hockey Canada president Bob Nicholson—and shared anecdotes, stories and a few lessons from his singular life and National Hockey League career.

His stories all involved family, whether biological or rink-based. There was no inspirational message in his tales of Stanley Cup wins and losses, just some funny moments with his teammates and his family. Son Trevor, a baseball player in the Chicago Cubs organization, got four mentions and his mom earned a few more. His grandparents dominated several recollections and, of course, many involved his dad, Walter.

The second most popular Gretzky in Canada. Wayne, talked to an enraptured crowd about everything from Vladislav Tretiak to Nelson Skalbania but always came back to his family.

At the end of his hour-long conversation with Nicholson, a seat number was pulled from a basket and eight-year-old Avery Makenzie and his five-year-old brother, Tate, got a chance to meet an NHL hero. Avery was wearing an Edmonton Oilers jersey that belongs to his twin brother, Sawyer. Only two kids could go, and Sawyer sacrificed his ticket to let Avery and Tate attend. It was a sacrifice play, the kind that wins you Stanley Cups, if you listen to guys like Wayne Gretzky.

Asked about the Nagano Olympics, when he was relegated to a benchwarmer by Bobby Clarke, Gretzky said he was just happy to be there.

"Although, I was sitting on the bench next to Stevie Yzerman and he said to me 'Who's shooting?' said Gretzky. 'I looked at him and I said 'I don't know, but you see that guy'—and I pointed to Joe Sakic— 'He's our best guy on the breakaway and he's not even dressed.'"

Gretzky was exactly what the fans in the audience expected, whether it's University of Lethbridge Pronghorns women's hockey coach Chandy Kaip, who spent her youth in Radville, Sask. watching Gretzky's "Above and Beyond" video in her grandmother's VCR or Coaldale's Conrad Neufeld scratching "Met Wayne Gretzky" off his bucket list, no one was there to necessarily hear the four-time Stanley Cup champ give a dissertation on leadership.

"Who was your favourite coach," asked by Jamie Miller, wearing a tiny Oilers cap and a plaid shirt, had Gretzky on his heels but the first answer was "My mom."

That got a round of applause. Gretzky then rattled off a few names, singling out Glen Sather as a "coach, mentor" but he settled finally on his dad, Walter. Gretzky said his final night in the NHL was memorable because he drove Walter to the game.

"He drove me to my first game, I wanted to drive him to my last," he said. "After, my wife was asking how the drive was and I said 'It was horrible. He kept saying to me: 'You know, you could play another year.'"

Walter Gretzky stories are the equivalent of American apple pie, based on the laughter and applause.

If Teamwork Training was worried about Gretzky getting off message, the should have been. He pulled every question back to his family, his friends, his teammates.

While other speakers offered inspirational advice, Gretzky's came with a purely Canadian twist.

"Remember, it's not whether you win or lose," he said. "It's how many goals you score." Gretzky said he told that one to a room of young hockey players once, while their coach nearly had a heart attack.

"Whatever, I think kids should just go out, play the game, have fun," he said.

His message at a conference about leadership wasn't forthright or direct, and it came in a series of anecdotes about his mom, his dad and the rest of his family. For Avery and Tate McKenzie, who got to go onstage and get a jersey signed by the greatest hockey player who ever lived, it came because of their brother, who already seems to get the message.

