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Rusty LeBlanc – A Regular Shot, But an Outstanding Coach

By André Veniot, Freelance Writer

“I’m a regular shot. I can hit a barn,” laughs Raoul “Rusty” LeBlanc. Of course, a barn is the standard target for most people. Big and hard to miss. Rusty plays down his accomplishments. Other people don’t.

He’s the coach of the New Brunswick Shooting Team at the most recent Canada Winter Games, and assistant coach of the Canadian Paralympic Shooting Team. That is, when he’s not escorting inmates from medium-security Dorchester Penitentiary – his day job.

Rusty, 51, started shooting in 1966, when he was 13 years old, taught by Henry LeBlanc, his mentor. From there he went on to the cadets and improved his skills, even teaching his squadron. Flash forward to 1989 when Henry called Rusty and asked him to go to a meeting in Salisbury for the New Brunswick team at the Canada Games air rifles competition.

“The coach wanted to know who was interested in coaching kids trying out for the 1991 Winter Games,” Rusty recalls. “So I got involved.”

In a big way. He redid his basement at his home in Memramcook, turning it into a shooting range. The kids started coming. “I probably had 120 to 130 kids come through. I had to put them into two groups, one at seven o’clock, the other at eight-thirty, shooting four nights a week. Seven or eight stayed with the program,” says Rusty.

The coaching bug had started. “That first competition we lost by half a point. But just ‘cause you fall down, it doesn’t mean you can’t get up.” Rusty found he had the right attitude and the ability to motivate.

“At the 1995 games in Grand Prairie, Alberta, three of my kids qualified. My daughter Stephanie, she was 16, got a silver. Overall the team finished sixth and the girls finished fourth. We did okay.” (Just in passing, Rusty’s son Sam and other daughter, Emilie, were all shooters).

From there it was the Games in Cornerbrook, Newfoundland and Dalhousie, New Brunswick and all the training camps and workshops between. Then came Bob Kierstead’s invitation. He’s the head coach of the Canadian Olympic and Paralympic Shooting teams.

They had known each other for years and Bob had trained and certified Rusty as a shooting coach. “I watched Rusty’s skills grow and, in particular, his interest in young people. It was bona fide and legitimate, not just as target shooters but beyond the sport. He cared about them and he used target shooting as a vehicle to help them develop lifelong skills,” says Bob.

“The successful competitive target shooter needs very specific disciplines,” says the head coach. “Focused concentration, the ability to block out distractions, setting goals and priorities. Look at the successful people in the world and they share those important skills. A good coach builds up a shooter’s ego and self-esteem and Rusty does that in young people. I have time for the person who does that.”

This year, Bob chose Rusty to be assistant coach for the Canadian Paralympic Team in competitions in Europe. “We ended up in first place in Switzerland but Germany was tougher. We got a couple of second places and ended up sixth as a team,” says Rusty matter-of-factly.

But Bob looks at something beyond the competition. “There’s extreme tension, stress and demands in traveling with disabled people in wheelchairs. It can make or break a project. A lot of people do it once and tell me ‘I don’t want to do this again.’ Rusty came through very well and the team was so pleased they want him back.”

Rusty says his approach to coaching able-bodied or disabled athletes is the same. “Wheelchair athletes don’t want to be treated differently. If they want your help, they’ll ask. Shooting is very, very technical. Anybody can learn but like everything, those who work hardest, end up on top. It requires a lot of patience, a lot of practice.”

There are other lessons he imparts and it’s not only about shooting. “I teach consistency. Sixty shots in a row require focus. You have one hour and 45 minutes to get them off. That’s a lot of concentration. Shooting is 90 percent mental. It’s the shooter who determines everything. All I do is supply the information and he or she takes it in”

Rusty has been coaching for 15 years and he still gets a kick out of it. “I enjoy watching the kids. When they do well, it’s something. When they shoot a bulls-eye, their eyes light up. I’ve done okay. I’m pretty happy with the results.” ■