

PANTHERS WARRIORS TEAM UP WITH NHL PROS FOR FUNDRAISER

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Hockey players got a chance to show off their ice skills at the Panthers Warriors Pro-Am exhibition at the Rink on the Beach in Pompano. (Panthers Warriors/Courtesy)

There was some star power lighting up the ice at the Rink on the Beach in Pompano Beach as the [Panthers Warriors](#) Pro-Am exhibition attracted former NHL alumni and military veterans to raise awareness and funds for injured and disabled veterans.

The pros got an opportunity to show their respect and admiration for the cause and the sacrifices that military members have given to the country. Healing through hockey is one of the mission points for the disabled veterans' program.



Former Florida Panther and NHL standout Ray Sheppard enjoys a light-hearted moment at the Rink on the Beach for the Panthers Warriors Pro-Am Invitational. (Panthers Warriors/Courtesy)

It was a thrill for the veterans to share some ice time with NHL stars like Darius Kasparaitus, Alexei Ponikarovsky, Anders Eriksson, Olli Jokinen, Radek Dvorak, Ray Sheppard, Sergei Yevseyev, Petr Schastlivy, Radek Konecny and AHL player Scooter Vaughan.

Former Panther and All-Star Ed Jovanovski was joined on the coaching sideline by Brett Schaeffer and Steve Vankyuk. Former Florida Panthers sportscaster and Miami Marlins host Craig Minervini, Chris Milark and Tom Warmington were the Pro-Am officials.

Some of the Panthers Warriors veterans helping out their fellow veterans with the hockey connection and team bonding therapy were Rich Amaral, Nick Butterworth, Rein Butterworth, Gio Carballo, Eric Jay Cuneo, Matt Childress, Rob Collins, EJ Cuneo, Rob George, Alex Haliday, Mike Heller, Ed Hickey, Brian Kopilec, Samir Lakhdar, Tim McEnery, Ned Timmons, Wayne Whitmore and Brian Woj.



Action took place at the Rink on the Beach ice during a Pro-Am exhibition to raise funds for disabled veterans with the Panthers Warriors Program. (Panthers Warriors/Courtesy)

All veterans are welcome to join the program. The Panthers Warriors public charity program is a registered member of USA Hockey, the Statewide Amateur Hockey Association of Florida and a sub-licensee of the NHL Florida Panthers.

The Panthers Warriors program is the brainchild of former Navy SEAL Gabriel “Gabe” Robert Accardi who joined forces with co-founder Gary Roskin to make the dream a reality. Accardi was a New York State High School and USA Hockey National Champion goalie and wanted to start a Warrior Hockey program in Florida for disabled veterans like himself.

The goal was to create a partnership with the Florida Panthers, which came to fruition on Sept. 4, 2019. Accardi died the same day they received approval from the Panthers organization.



Players and veterans gather at center ice before the Panthers Warriors Pro-Am exhibition to help raise funds for disabled veterans. (Panthers Warriors/Courtesy)

In Accardi's honor, the Panthers Warriors went out to compete in the 2019 Warriors Classic in Las Vegas and came home with the championship. The year-round program competes in two USA Hockey National Tournaments, the USA Hockey Disabled Festival and the Warriors Classic.

"Gabe was not able to hear the news that we accomplished our initial mission with the Panthers and we were devastated that he would not be in the net making amazing saves and leading us to victory," Roskin said. "We wiped away our tears and continued our mission to begin the Panthers Warriors program and honor Gabe's legacy by coming back home as champions of the Warriors Classic. Gabe was with us and will be there every game we play."

There were many challenges that the Panthers Warriors encountered coming out of the gate. Winning the championship was a harbinger of good things to come.



The Panthers Warriors Pro-Am Hockey game was a high-scoring affair that raised awareness and funds for disabled veterans. The event took place at the Rink on the Beach in Pompano Beach. (Panthers Warriors/Courtesy)

“As a new program, I’m not sure how we did it but we came back with the championship banner,” Roskin said. “With COVID, we had been put on hold for about 10 months, but we have a strong Board of Advisors guiding us.”

Many veterans returning back home from active duty have physical and mental disabilities with severe post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries.

Veteran Nick Butterworth worked with Accardi to get the USA Hockey Warrior program off the ground. Butterworth was instrumental in putting the Panthers Warriors team together for its Las Vegas Warriors Classic championship run and is a valuable board member.

The Pro-Am game featured NHL alumni and veterans on each team with every line having at least one professional mixed in with the players. All spectators in attendance followed COVID-19 safety protocols at the Rink on the Beach and sales were limited to maintain social-distancing standards.

The high-scoring affair ended with a final 13-12 score that kept all the parties interested. The NHL pros made sure they made the veteran players look good with precise passing for multiple scoring opportunities. Former Florida Panther Jokinen organized getting the NHL players on the ice, who were happy to interact and devote their time to the veterans.



The Panthers Warriors Disabled Veterans Hockey Program teamed up with NHL alumni to put on a Pro-Am fundraiser at the Rink on the Beach in Pompano. (Panthers Warriors/Courtesy)

About \$5,000 was raised. American Gun Range was a corporate partner to the event that also featured a silent auction.

Roskin, a transplant from Chicago, has been playing hockey in Florida since 1983. He joined the Panthers Warriors Hockey Board of Directors, which has a majority of military members on it.

Getting the [Florida Panthers Foundation](#) to back the project with a grant was a major accomplishment for the Panthers Warriors organization. The group depends on fundraising and charitable contributions from corporations and individuals to run the program. They are always looking to organize and play fundraising games against local college, high school, first responders and NHL players.

“We are a proud sub-licensee of the Florida Panthers and there are about 36 Warrior teams around the country,” Roskin said. “We are very fortunate, and we take this responsibility seriously because we not only represent ourselves, and the Florida Panthers brand, but also our country. As Gabe would say, ‘We are not building a hockey team, we are building a program.’ He was the spark that got us going. This is recreational therapy, and we call it healing through hockey. We would love to get the word out to any veteran who wants to join us.”

The next event will be the 2021 Ultraskate at Homestead-Miami Speedway on Friday, Jan. 29.

Visit pantherswarriorshockey.org.