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School's Olympic legacy continues

May 27, 2008

TONY SAXON
GUELPH MERCURY

GUELPH

Having an Olympic athlete visit your high school is one thing. Having an Olympic athlete you can call your own, well, that's priceless.

Kaleigh Rafter, a catcher on Canada's Olympic softball team, dropped by St. James Catholic High School yesterday to walk through some familiar hallways and say hello to her brother Mike, a teacher at the school.

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Little did she know she would be called up on stage at an end-of-year awards ceremony in the gymnasium and receive an ovation from hundreds of students.

"I was totally in the dark about it," Rafter, 21, said of the assembly. "I just came in to see my brother."

Rafter graduated from St. James in 2004. She left Guelph that fall for a softball scholarship at the University of Detroit Mercy.

After three years there she has spent the last year out of school, spending it either with the Canadian Olympic squad at tournaments and training camps or practising with teammates who have made Las Vegas their training base of late.

"It's been 95 per cent training for months. Maybe one day off a week. To get home for a week or two is unrealistic, so you get home when you can," she said. "You hope your family and friends are understanding."

Rafter leaves Guelph Friday to hook up with the Olympic team in Oklahoma City to begin an 87-day schedule in which they will play 50 games, including a mini exhibition tournament in Kitchener July 6 to 8.

Rafter said her old high school played a huge role in helping her become the person she is today.

"This is definitely a vital part of where I am today, there have been so many mentors through the years here. It definitely gave me the start and the base for where and who I am now," she said.

St. James principal Peter Ingram told students Rafter was an example of what you can achieve if

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you set your mind to it and work hard enough.

He spoke not only of Rafter's athletic achievements while playing for numerous Lions' sports teams, but also of her character.

"I've never told this story before, but I got a letter one time from a parent of a basketball player from an Owen Sound high school," Ingram said. "They were the favourites to win a CWOSSA tournament and Kaleigh's team beat them. After the game she went into their dressing room to console their players. This parent thought that was one of the most impressive things he had ever seen."

Rafter won't be the first member of the St. James community in the Olympic spotlight. Teacher Bob Sharpe played basketball for Canada at the 1976 Olympics. "Kaleigh's been involved in a lot of highly competitive situations, so I'm sure she'll be well prepared," Sharpe said, adding he "was breathless when I went through the tunnel into the stadium for the opening ceremonies."

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