

Lancaster/Iroquois merger a big hit in girls hockey

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Goalie Madeline Norton and forward Meghan Fonfara have a lot to be happy about as the Lancaster/Iroquois team has done a lot of winning since the schools joined forces.

Lancaster/Iroquois merger a big hit in girls hockey

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Lancaster and Iroquois came together out of necessity as they needed each other in order to turn ice dreams into reality.

These days, they feel like they've won the lottery.

Talented Iroquois seniors like Meghan Fonfara and Caitlin Horvatis wouldn't have the chance to play in the Western New York Girls Varsity Hockey Federation, which is now in its fourth season, if not for the merger with Lancaster, one of the Fed's founding programs. Iroquois' girls get to experience the pride that comes with officially representing their school in athletic competition on the ice, while Lancaster no longer has a goose egg under the win column after three winless seasons.

The team does have a zero under the loss column, however, a sign that the partnership has been a huge success.

The program enters tonight's showdown with two-time defending Section VI champion Kenmore (8:15 at Lincoln Ice Arena) as the Federation's final unbeaten team. Lancaster/Iroquois sports a 4-0-1 record, while Kenmore is 6-1-2.

"Everything came together really fast," said sophomore defenseman Brianna Colucci, of Lancaster, who is in her third season on the team. "All of the girls, we all bonded together very well. We pretty much became a family. On the ice, the girls who just started playing a couple years ago, they've picked up the game pretty fast. It's nice that they're able to compete with us."

Said fourth-year coach Dave Santoro: "We were getting better. ... Definitely the merger with Iroquois has been the difference. We were a one-line, line-and-a-half team with just Lancaster. Adding the six girls from Iroquois gives us three lines."

And enough depth to bring a potential worst to first story line to the forefront with the playoffs just three weeks away.

What's made everything work? Some of the players also have had encounters with each other on the youth hockey circuit. The mature attitude of the girls from both schools has been the key.

"We came to help. We didn't come to steal the show," said assistant coach Pete Tonsoline, who also coaches field hockey and teaches at Iroquois. "That was our approach. I think that's why it got off so well. ... We all want to be successful."

The addition of Fonfara, a first team All-Western New York pick in field hockey, has been quite a boost. Fonfara, who also plays for the nationally ranked Buffalo Bisons' 19-under team coached by Scott Welch, leads the team in goals with eight, including a six-goal game in the season opener. She's tall, strong on her feet, has good hands and plays in all situations.

The others from Iroquois who join 12 returnees from last year's Lancaster crew include backup goalie and junior Maria LoTempio, junior defenseman Erin Keppner and freshmen forwards Brianna Keppner and Hayley Fonfara.

Besides Colucci, key returnees include defensemen Megan Reukauf, a junior, and sophomores Kristen Bull and Jenna Hagen. The starting goalie, junior Madeline Norton, is in her third season on the team.

Senior forward Kara Orłowski and junior forward Rene Doherty are the only players remaining from Lancaster's inaugural season.

The top two public school teams in the standings at the end of the regular season meet for the Section VI title on Feb. 5 at the Northtown Center at Amherst, with the winner of that game participating in the second New York State Tournament on Feb. 7-8. The Federation holds its own eight-team playoff tournament, beginning Feb. 10 and ending with the championship game on Valentine's Day.

Can Lancaster/Iroquois make a run at a spot in the sectional final?

It'll be fun watching everything play out, but from a Lancaster/Iroquois perspective one thing is certain.

"We can't wait to be on the ice and play a game," Colucci said. "In past years we were excited but getting blown out for the most part in games wasn't as fun as compared to this year. ... This year we're able to compete and win and celebrate afterwards. ... We're able to go into the games knowing we can compete more."

Kenmore rolling

Kenmore may not be unbeaten but it has compiled the most points (14) in the league. It has done that while missing three key pieces from last year's team due to minor knee injuries: top defenseman and captain Kaeli Mathias and forwards Jill Battista and Lina Mirabella.

Good thing it returned first team All-League goalie Lauren Pray.

“That’s what’s really been pulling us through,” coach Jeff Orlowski said of the junior. “She’s kept us in every game. You have a goalie like Lauren, you only need a couple of goals,” to win.

Mathias is one of just three seniors on a team that consists mostly of sophomores and juniors, along with her twin Brianna and Battista. Freshman Olivia Smith averages a goal a game and is one of the hardest working players on the team, according to Orlowski.

Grace Simmons, an alternate captain, is part of the team’s top defensive pair, along with Kaeli Mathias once she’s cleared to play.

Elsewhere, the cupboard appears to be well stocked for Williamsville, last year’s Section VI runner-up.

Senior captain and defenseman Rachel Grampp earned Second Team All-Federation honors last year and has caught the attention of Elmira, last year’s Division III national champion.

“She plays both ends of the rink very, very well,” Williamsville coach Rick Hopkins said. “Solid defender but a real offensive threat. She’s a dominant player in the league.”

Another key returnee is third-year starting goalie Teresa Meosky along with senior classmate and center Jordan Roetzer. Roetzer has nice hands, according to Hopkins, is strong on draws and in the corners. She has nice on-ice chemistry with junior Sarah Scolnick, who is one of the fastest skaters in the league and has a good shot.

Meosky makes up for “some lapses we may have in our end during the game,” Hopkins said.

Century club

In case anyone missed it, West Seneca senior Erin Gehen became the first player in Fed history to record 100 career goals, achieving the feat Dec. 19 in an 8-1 loss to Amherst/Sweet Home.

Gehen, who had seven goals and two assists during a 10-6 win last season, needed just 63 games to hit the 100 milestone. She had four goals and six points through the team’s first four games.

Coach Brian Hillery, who slides over from the assistant’s role to head coach, believes whatever career goal total she finishes with once this season is over could be the Fed standard for years to come.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if I coached for 30 more years if nobody gets close to 100 goals,” Hillery said of Gehen, one of five returning First Team All-Federation picks skating for teams in the league this season.

Hillery said Gehen, who also plays soccer, has sent out tapes to a couple of schools in hopes of getting some interest in her talents from colleges.

As impressive as 100 in 63 is, an even more impressive number for West Seneca this season is 18.

That’s the number of players on its roster this year after having just 10 a year ago. How did West Seneca lure more players to the team?

The program did a better job spreading the word to all the schools in the West Seneca district and to parents as there were some, according to Hillery, who didn’t even know the district offered girls hockey even though West Seneca is one of the founding members of the league.

“We advertised the team a little bit more and it worked out,” he said. “Hopefully every year we can keep building and building and not just in West Seneca but all girls in the city of Buffalo.”

Besides Gehen, key returnees include third-year defenseman Brianna Carlin and fourth-year forward Molly Sikorski, Gehen’s linemate and best friend, Hillery said. Defenseman Bridget Bork returns after missing last year with a knee injury.

Tough competition

Monsignor Martin lost just four players from last year's 20-0 team (three to full-season travel teams and one to Nichols).

But in a sign of just how competitive this league has become, the two-time defending Federation playoff champion has already lost twice (to Lancaster/Iroquois and Williamsville) and tied twice (Kenmore and Frontier/Orchard Park). Still, MMA has a winning pedigree on its resume and key returnees including Nardin senior forward Rachel Lenard, a first team All-Federation pick last year, and 5-foot-7 sophomore defenseman Maeve Christ of Mount Mercy. Christ has lots of offensive skill, according to coach Linda Mroz.

She's not the only blue-liner with size for the Catholic team as 5-10 Sacred Heart junior Amelia Gajewski is a good skaters with a big shot.

Amherst/Sweet Home, under the guidance of first-year coach Nicola Adimey, appears to be coming together quite well after finishing as a semifinalist in last season's Fed playoffs. The Katz have two returning First Team All-Federation selections in forward Missy Mallon and defenseman Maddy Grisko and are off to a 4-2 start. They've had three games rescheduled due to the weather, which Adimey said allowed the team to get in more practice time so that it could feel better prepared heading into games.

Just how serious was catcher Maddie Aston's quest to become a reliable goalie? After volunteering to play the position last season out of necessity for the Katz (they didn't have a goalie), the starter continued to hone her skills by practicing during the offseason with an area women's team and attended various goalie camps. Adimey said Aston's athleticism has been key to her being such a quick study at the position.

Frontier/Orchard Park started 1-4-1 but each game has been close, including a pair of one-goal losses to Lancaster/Iroquois, a 3-1 loss to Kenmore in which it yielded an empty-net goal. Coach Jim McCarthy's squad features four seventh-graders, four eighth-graders, 11 juniors and just one senior. Key returnees include defensemen Olivia Jacobs and Tatum Walber, who are both very good. Goalie Mikaela DiTondo plays every game while top forwards include the Urbank sisters – Jessica, Megan and Rachel.

Nichols report

Iroquois, via joining forces with Lancaster, isn't the only newcomer to the Federation. Nichols' Prep B team, which in past seasons played in a lower tier of the Canadian-based Conference of Independent Schools Athletic Association, said yes when asked to join the circuit.

It is the only member of the league that doesn't draw players from multiple schools.

The Vikings got off to a hot start with wins over Kenmore and Amherst/Sweet Home, but have had trouble recovering from the loss of goalie Margaret Janiga – who missed five games with mono before returning late last week. Nichols didn't have another goalie on its roster so coach Tom Iafallo "just put in a couple different girls who wanted to try it and had fun with it."

Iafallo said it's been great competing in the Fed and not just because of the shorter bus rides (30 minutes to East Aurora is the longest roadie).

"It's competitive," he said "It's great for the girls, less travel and it's unique because they've played with girls on the other teams during their travel" careers.

Besides Janiga, key players on the team include her twin sister Marissa, a forward; senior defenseman Emily Certo and senior forwards Jen Sauter and Katherine Darling.

Meanwhile, Nichols' top prep team, which is the two-time defending CISAA and North American Prep Hockey Association champions, is ranked fourth nationally among U.S. Prep Schools. The Vikings (13-2-3) have six seniors, including five who have already signed Division I letters of intent in Allison Gasuik (Ohio State), Julianna Iafallo (Ohio State), Brandy Streeter (Union), Madison Sansone (Providence) and Annika Zalewski (Colgate). Senior Lizzy Viola will play for current Division III national No. 1 Plattsburgh. For those keeping score at home, that means Nichols' entire senior class will have the opportunity to play college hockey.

Gasuik has been sidelined with a lower body injury since October but should return in February, according to coach

Scott Welch.

The absence hasn't slowed down Nichols, which recently won the prestigious Deerfield College Invitational and returns to action this weekend in Lake Placid at the Northwood Invitational.

Three underclassmen also have caught the eyes of Division I suitors, including juniors Olivia Zafuto (Colgate) and Madison Welch (Syracuse) and her younger sister, sophomore Abigail Welch (Penn State).

Coach Welch, who is in his fourth season with the Vikings, is three wins away from No. 100.

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