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In the deep end

Depth is key to Utica High boys hockey season

By Brad D. Bates
C & G Sports Writer

MACOMB TOWNSHIP — There is one consistent theme surrounding the success of the 2007-'08 Utica High boys hockey team — depth.

The Chieftains have three forward lines this year and are hoping their improved depth — along with the high level of play of all the teams in the Macomb Area Conference — will have them prepared for a long run in the Division 1 postseason.

“If you look at where the MAC was when we started and where we are now, the teams are much better,” Utica coach Kevin Nye said. “MAC teams are getting invited to the top tournaments in the state, and it’s a testament to where the MAC has gone. Our team is no exception.”

Along with the experience of playing better teams, the Chieftains are also relying on their ability to play those three lines of forwards — all of which give them the ability



Photo by David Schreiber

Utica High senior forward Mike Toman races to a loose puck during the Chieftains' 2-1 win against St. Clair Shores Unified Jan. 18 at Civic Ice Arena.

to generate offense.

“We have a lot of skilled players that can play any type of game — physical, speed and skill,” Nye said. “Our team is balanced ... so its just tightening up the things we know need polishing.”

At press time, the Chieftains were in second place in the MAC Red at 6-1-2, one point behind 6-1-3 Macomb Dakota and 7-2-1 St. Clair High. Nye’s confidence in the team’s ability is rubbing off the players.

“Better competition during the season prepares us for better teams in the playoffs,” senior forward Mike Toman said. “We still want to win a league title, but we’re mainly worried about the postseason and going further than we have in past years.”

The players are hoping that gutting out close games in league play will be excellent preparation for what they’re likely to see when the postseason gets under way Feb. 25.

“Since we’ve had tighter games, we’ve learned how to play those close games,” senior defenseman Derek Sabiston said. “We know we’re not going to blow out any teams in our league, so you learn to play to the end of the game.”

Last year, Utica advanced to the regional final where it lost 6-1 to eventual state semifinalist Grosse Pointe North.

But this year, Nye feels his team can go much further.

“I would put our team out there against anybody,” Nye said. “If we can compete for three periods with three lines, every shift, we can go against anybody.”

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