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**Photo by Patricia O’Blens**

**Warren Cousino senior and Warren/Sterling United goalie Willie Mistretta hangs onto the puck during the Thunder’s 4-2 win Feb. 12 against Plymouth Salem at the Plymouth Cultural Center Ice Arena.**

# A Sterling finish

## Sterling Heights area prep hockey teams take season to wire

By Brad D. Bates  
C & G Sports Writer

For hockey teams in the Macomb Area Conference White Division, the state playoffs might as well have started two weeks early.

Heading into the final week of league play, there were five teams separated by two points in the White standings, and in the thick of it were Utica Ford II, Warren/Sterling United and defending league champion Utica Stevenson.

“When you have five teams within two points of each other, it makes for a great way to end the season,” said Ford II coach Lee Jenkins, whose team was in second place at 9-3-2 and one point behind league-leader Harrison Township L’Anse Creuse.

“These big games to end the season are going to be a great way to get ready for even bigger games in the playoffs.”

With the race so tight, much of the season came down to games Feb. 16, after the Sterling Heights Sentry went to press. But it’s the grind through the final weeks that has local coaches excited to see what their players can do in the postseason.

“We play Warren/Sterling and L’Anse Creuse North to end the league, so that will be a great way to prepare us for Ford,” Stevenson coach Al Korolewicz said regarding getting set to open the Division 1 postseason against rival Ford II at the Troy Sports Center.

While all three squads have arrived at the same spot as they vie for the same prize — a league title and extended playoff run — all three took different roads to get there.

### Utica Stevenson

After skating to an 11-1-2 finish and a MAC White title in 2006-‘07, Stevenson started this season 5-6-1 before winning eight of its next 10 games, including a perfect 6-0 stretch in the White.

“We lost our three senior captains from last year’s team,” said Korolewicz, whose team was 9-4-1 and two points behind L’Anse Creuse at press time. “You need to have

leadership from within the team. So even though we had some young, talented players, we still didn't have that leadership.

“Once (seniors Garret Gostek, Eric Seedorf and Ian Konnie) realized that if they didn't take the reins the season would be a long one, things turned around.”

In addition to the leadership, the Titans have also put together the league's top offense, totaling 117 goals through 22 games for a 5.31 average.

“Our leading scorer is (senior forward) Derek Glowacki, who is our most pure offensive player,” Korolewicz said. “But our two sophomores, (forward) Drew DiMarti and (forward) Juston Zyvon, have been great. Their line has been our best lately.”

### **Utica Ford II**

Ford II was on the opposite side of where the Titans were a year ago, finishing last in the White with a 3-10-1 record.

But the time spent learning the ropes helped them start 2007-'08 with six straight wins, and they had extended their record to 14-5-2 at press time.

“Last year, we had trouble scoring goals,” Jenkins said. “But this year, we've improved our power play and added a few guys, so the goal scoring has been a lot easier,” Jenkins said. “When the power play executes correctly, it's one of those ‘ooh’ and ‘ahh’ moments.”

The Falcons' special teams are highlighted by umbrella-style power-play units led by junior forward Kyle Hautala and sophomore defenseman Kyle Jacobson. Together, they converted 25 percent of the time and led a penalty-kill unit with a nearly 90 percent success rate.

### **Warren/Sterling United**

For the first time in the short history of the program, the Thunder are vying for a MAC championship. Warren/Sterling United was 8-1-4 in the league at press time, leaving it one point behind the Lancers and tied for second with the Falcons and Macomb L'Anse Creuse North.

“I think we're ready this year,” said coach Andy Peraino, whose team opens up the Division 1 postseason against University of Detroit Jesuit at the St. Clair Shores Civic Ice Arena.

“We’ve had nine different players score game-winning goals, and we’re getting a balanced effort where every line has been effective.”

The Thunder have surged on the merits of a nine-game unbeaten stretch that saw them improve from 0-2 overall and 0-1 in the White to 8-2-1 overall and 5-1-1 in the White.

“We have five seniors who are tired of being on the losing side,” Peraino said of his veterans, forward Adam Kramer (Cousino), forward Tom Farrah (Cousino), defenseman Drew Kwart (Sterling Heights High), forward Mike Billotti (Cousino) and goalie Willie Mistretta (Cousino).

“Those seniors were our core to start the season, but now our underclassmen are catching up with their skills and knowledge and have given us a real boost.”

While Stevenson and Ford II lead the White in scoring, with Stevenson outscoring opponents by an average of 2.27 goals per game and Ford II at 2.09, the Thunder have played closer games, with an differential of 0.81 goals per game.

“In general, the top six teams in the MAC White are a lot stronger,” Peraino said. “Those battles are really going to prepare us for the playoffs.”

Pre-regional draws were not finalized at press time. For times and dates of all playoff games, please contact the host arena.

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