

# Fred Costello SLAP SHOTS

## Lakers hope to use Showcase as a springboard

## Saint Clair Shores Unified plays some of its best hockey of year at tournament

If I've learned one thing in my time covering Macomb County boys ice hockey, it is this: You better have your cell phone charged before you dial up Frank DiCristofaro. Otherwise, you'll be lucky to make it past that first hour.

All kidding aside, the Saint Clair Shores Unified coach is nothing if not full of stories. And how could he not be? Now, three decades into his career behind the bench, DiCristofaro has quite literally seen — and won — it all. But last weekend he got to witness a first, as in the inaugural Macomb Area Conference Showcase Tournament held at Suburban Macomb. The tournament featured every team in the county under one roof and was organized by Dakota coach Dave Koons, with help from Romeo's Rich Boggio. The result was a series of 18 games in a span of 34 hours that went down without incident.

"You couldn't ask for something run better than that," Di-Cristofaro said. "People were working from sun up to sun down and my hat's off to them because it was run so professionally."

Lakers junior forward Chris Pontello, perhaps the county's most dangerous scorer, was among several MAC players to garner interest from junior hockey programs during the event. Increasing the exposure of the league's stars and top teams was the goal and it clearly was achieved.

Shores faced MAC Red Division leader Dakota the first game and tackled second-place Anchor Bay the next. The Lakers were able to walk away with a tie against the Cougars, but followed up with an even stronger effort in a shutout win over the Tars in the second game.

Why did they play so much better? That's simple. They didn't want to get the chair. No, not that chair. This seat is more like one you might find at a backyard summer barbeque.

"I told them if we didn't get a better effort, then I'd be throwing the chair at them," DiCristofaro said through his distinctive laugh. "A chair practice is when I throw a plastic chair out onto the ice, sit down and do a crossword puzzle while they skate and skate and skate," he said with a laugh growing more devilish by the second.

Faced with those prospects, it was no surprise that the Lakers played one of their better games of the season, stretching the unbeaten streak to six.

Freshman goalie Zach Kosal, who has been brilliant at times, earned the shutout. The Lakers also got noteworthy play from defensemen Nick Singleton, Steve Eatherly, Adam Cruz, Josh Detrick and Robbie Demers.

And while Pontello, forwards Joe Kommer and Cory Shafer all are off to impressive seasons, Di-Cristofaro has a soft spot for Justin Rutkowski.

A fourth-year varsity player, Rutkowski is a senior co-captain that seems to embody everything that his coach is trying to instill in all members of the team.

"Joe is a true, blue Laker," Di-Cristofaro said. "He's not huge in stature, but he's one of the hardest-working kids. I'm really going to miss him."

The rest of the season will find the Lakers battling for supremacy in the hotly contested Red Division. They are currently looking up at the Cougars, who they trail by three points, as well as the Tars, who are one point ahead.

The team also will join Utica and Anchor Bay in the prestigious Trenton Showcase in mid-February. A well-known tournament on a state-wide level, the Trenton Showcase has a reputation for attracting some of the top talent the high school level has to offer.

Outside of competing for the Red title, DiCristofaro isn't quite sure what the future holds for his team, or himself for that matter.

"I'd like a shot at winning it all one more time," DiCristofaro said. "Whether that will happen or not, I don't know. I am real proud of all the guys. They're gamers. They're learning how to come to the rink and win. I tell them to just show up and play hard and that will get you far."

DiCristofaro has unquestionably come a long way. As the years have progressed, the 51-year-old coach has allowed his brother Russ to assume more and more of the coaching responsibilities. I ask if he'll be the Joe Paterno of high school hockey — going on to coach indefinitely.

"If people are wondering that about me now, I think I'm in trouble," DiCristofaro said, with that ever-present laugh making another appearance. "I go yearby-year. I still enjoy it, but it's getting harder. If I've learned one thing, it's that you never say never. I might be done with this and move on to the next thing. I grew up in the Shores and went right from playing into coaching. The kids keep me young and I just try and teach them how to be better adults and hopefully they get something out of it."

At this point in our conversation it appears both the coach and the reporter are getting the plug pulled. I can hear Frank whisper, "we'll be done in about 30 seconds," to his understanding wife of 29 years, Renee.

Meanwhile, my better half has given me the "enough hockey for the day" stare.

Thirty seconds (or was it 20 minutes?) later, we wrap it up.

Lord knows neither of us wants the chair.

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