



Photos by Patricia O'Blenes

St. Clair Shores Unified senior forward Joe Rutkowski races ahead of Grosse Pointe North junior Alexander Tomovski Dec. 3 at the Mount Clemens Ice Arena.

Back to basics

St. Clair Shores Unified hockey refocuses on discipline

By Brad D. Bates
 C & G Sports Writer

After using a relaxed approach to start the 2008-09 season, a 3-4-1 record forced St. Clair Shores Unified hockey coach Frank DiCristofaro to turn back the clock.

“I told them at our first practice of the new year, ‘Welcome to your new world — my world,’” DiCristofaro said. “After that, we’ve beaten Eisenhower, tied Grosse Pointe South, beat Rochester United, beat Birmingham United, tied Dakota and beat Anchor Bay.

“There’s no more kids showing up late to practice or anything like that. Without discipline, you don’t have anything. That’s a long-standing rule that nothing changes.”

Though the Lakers are down to a 13-man roster, partially, DiCristofaro said, because of his renewed adherence to discipline, he believes the Lakers can overcome that.

“We’ve been picking it up, but we’re short-handed, so we’ll see how it goes,” DiCristofaro said of his team maintaining it’s 4-0-2 mark since the new year began.

“Discipline is the key, though, and the kids are working hard. In the old days, we used to play with 15, so we’ll see if these kids can be throwbacks.

“It’s going to be interesting, but we’ll battle. Win, lose or draw, we’ll battle. If I see even one kid who isn’t battling in a game, they’re all going to skate the next day in practice.”

If any of his players question their coach’s message of discipline and its merits, he calls on a little real-world evidence that hits all too close to home.



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“You have to experience the hard parts of life to get better,” DiCristofaro said. “I’ve been through all the cuts at Ford Motor Company, and I’m one of the lucky ones still here.

“I tell the kids how hard it is when you see someone you know leave, and realize they’re not coming back. Kids need to know you have to work for things. It’s old school, but a lot of good things are old school.”

Championing DiCristofaro’s charge among the players is his core of veteran defensemen.

Senior captain Nick Singleton and junior Josh Detrick lead a group that embodies the hard work and physical play DiCristofaro is looking for and have helped the Lakers to a 2.00 goals-against average in their six-game unbeaten streak.

“Our seniors, like Nick Singleton, play hard,” DiCristofaro said. “We picked up (junior defensemen) Adam Cruz, and he fits that mold, too.”

Along with his blueliners, DiCristofaro’s defense has been shored up with the emergence of freshman goalie Zach Kosal, who shares time with senior Jared Jasper and was in net for the Lakers’ 4-0 win against Anchor Bay Jan. 17.

“(Assistant coach) Russ (DiCristofaro) and our goalies’ coach Doc (Bryan) Baetens have worked real hard with them (goalies),” DiCristofaro said. “So hopefully, by the end of the season, they’ll be tough as nails.”

With sophomores Anthony Fiore and Nick Shultz contributing, the Lakers’ forward line have also benefited from an infusion of youth.

“They’re coming along,” DiCristofaro said of his sophomores. “They’re working really hard, and I couldn’t be more happy with them.”

The young players give the Lakers depth behind talented veterans, such as senior captain Joe Rutkowski (five goals and 12 assists), and juniors Chris Pontello (18 goals and four assists) and Cory Shafer (eight goals and 10 assists).

“Chris Pontello is one of the best players in Macomb County, if not the state,” DiCristofaro said. “We’ve also got (junior) Joe Kommer. He’s a big, strong kid. He’s 6-4, and we’re teaching him to play Lakers hockey.”

With his roster taking shape and his message sinking in, DiCristofaro is hoping his team meshes before the playoffs — especially given the high level of competition they’re set to face.

“There’s no easy way down the mountain,” DiCristofaro said of their upcoming schedule, which is highlighted by home games against St. Clair High (Feb. 7) and Macomb Dakota (Feb. 21), and road games against Novi High (Feb. 12), Flint Powers (Feb. 14) and Troy High (Feb. 28.)

“But if you want to be an experienced team, you have to be experienced against the top teams. And if you want to be respected, you have to beat the big guys.”

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