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Photo by Patricia O'Blenes

Utica Eisenhower senior forward Joe Warner is one of eight seniors looking to end their hockey career with the Eagles as MAC White champions.

Eagles eye prize

Eisenhower hockey looks to recapture championship glory

By Brad D. Bates
C & G Sports Writer

MACOMB TOWNSHIP — After finishing the 2005-06 hockey season in the Division 1 Michigan High School Athletic Association Division 1 state semifinals, Utica Eisenhower set a new standard for all Macomb County public school programs.

And despite winning a total of six games between that semifinal appearance and the start of the 2008-09 season, its expectations remain lofty.

“There’s pride in the school and pride in the Eagle on their chests,” coach Bob Hall said.

“In the locker room or on the bench, it’s all about the team. That starts from the top, from your leaders.”

That pride has helped the Eagles break away from their leaner years and start 2008-09 12-3-1 overall, 4-2-1 in the Macomb Area Conference White Division.

“Everyone knows what we’ve done the last two years,” senior forward Joe Warner said. “Now, we’re looking to go past that. We’re working for what every team works for, a league championship.”

At press time, the Eagles, who moved from the MAC Red to White this year, were in second place, three points behind Macomb L’Anse Creuse North.

“You look at the top teams in the MAC Red and the top teams in the MAC White, and there’s not that much of a difference,” Hall said.

“L’Anse Creuse North is a very good team. (Utica) Stevenson is dynamite. So to say

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that the MAC White is easier than the Red is ridiculous.”

It hasn't been just pride or a change in divisions that's put the Eagles back in the championship discussion. A combination of team chemistry, depth and a willingness to do whatever is necessary to win are the driving forces behind Eisenhower's resurgence.

“Any time they come to the rink, for games or practice, the attitude is serious,” Hall said. “Everything is done for one goal, to improve the program.

“When they step on the ice, they go hard and give it all they have for the benefit of the team. From blocking shots to hustling on defense, they do all the little things that make an average team more successful.”

“Average” may not do the Eagles' talent level justice.

Led by seasoned travel players such as Warner and senior defenseman Ryan Persha, Eisenhower might have more depth than any team in its league, as evidenced by its six players with five or more goals.

“It's a little surprising,” Persha said about his team's balanced production. “After tryouts, though, you could start to see it. I could see we were very solid when everyone was contributing.”

With everyone making their name known on the score sheet, the Eagles have seen an uptick in the camaraderie and chemistry departments, as well, which has only helped further their turnaround.

“Our bonding,” Warner said of his team's primary strength. “We play travel hockey against one another, and to play with guys like (Persha) is a relief. When you build a team with rivals, you come together that much better.”

While the Eagles are focused on reclaiming their first MAC title since their groundbreaking 2005-06 season, all of the positive factors behind the program's resurgence may have them on pace for a little more playoff glory, as well.

“That will be determined,” Hall said of whether this team has what it takes for a playoff run. “The next six weeks will definitely show us if we have that next gear.”
Eisenhower faces Romeo High at 8:30 p.m. Jan. 24 at Macomb Suburban Ice Arena.

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