

Hornets overcome adversity to remain in contention in PWHL

By Herb Garbutt
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Truth be told, the Oakville Hornets have absolutely no business being where they are, which is nestled into the middle of the pack in the Provincial Women's Hockey League.

That's not an indictment of the talent the Hornets have iced, but given what the team has encountered this season, some early struggles could certainly have been expected.

For starters, half the players donning the Hornet jersey are rookies. While that still gives Oakville eight players with PWHL experience, five of them played with different teams last year.

The bigger obstacle faced by the Hornets was the loss of both their goalies to concussions before the season even began. Stephanie Loukes was the first to be felled when she was whacked over the head with a stick in the Stoney Creek tournament two weeks before the season. A week later, Daniela Paniccia was run over late in a pre-season game.

"Basically, we went with midget call-ups to start the season," said rookie head coach Jackie Kendrick. "At that point, they hadn't even played midget yet, so we had two goalies who the last time they faced shots in a game, it was in bantam. That's a big jump."

The growing pains that could have been anticipated lasted all of one game, an 8-1

loss to Mississauga, a team that has made the league's final four each of the last four years. Since then, Oakville has gone 5-2-3 and despite its revolving door in net, has allowed the fifth fewest goals in the 20-team league.

Midget goalies Nikki Cece and Tera Hofmann held the fort until Loukes and Paniccia returned this past weekend. Each of the midget keepers posted a shutout in their stint with the Hornets — Hofmann making 19 saves in a 1-0 win over London and Cece turning aside 27 shots in 2-0 win over Barrie.

Loukes became the third Hornet goalie to record a shutout this season when she stopped 27 shots in Sunday's 2-0 win over Leaside. A day earlier, Paniccia carried a shutout into the third before Brampton rallied for a 2-1 win, snapping a five-game unbeaten streak.

"It was a hard position to put everyone in, especially having a young team," said Paniccia, who stopped 31 shots in a 3-3 tie with Etobicoke in her PWHL debut last Friday. "It sucked, especially for my first year of junior. I wanted to be on the ice but the midget goalies did a good job filling in."

Paniccia, a Grade 11 student at Loyola, already has an NCAA commitment from Penn State, where she will follow in the footsteps of her sister Nicole, currently in her senior year with the Nittany Lions.

"They were scouting me before Nicole was even going there (transferring from the University of Connecticut)," she said. "It's



Christina Putigna scored the tying goal with less than five minutes to play in the Oakville Hornets' 3-3 tie with Etobicoke last Friday, extending the Hornets' unbeaten streak to five games. That streak ended the next night with a 2-1 loss to Brampton. | **file photo by Michael Ivanin— Special to the Oakville Beaver**

really weird how everything fell into place. What are the odds?"

Paniccia won't start at Penn State until 2016, giving her two more years in the

PWHL. That should provide the Hornets with plenty of depth at the position, especially considering the rate Oakville is producing netminders. Loukes and Cece are also Oakville natives while Ali Binnington (RIT), Paniccia (Penn State), Brittany Smrke (McGill) and Cami Leonard (Plattsburgh) are all recent graduates of the Hornets minor system. PWHL starters Sarah McDonnell (Stoney Creek) and Alysia DaSilva (Mississauga) are also from Oakville.

As well as the Hornets' current netminders have performed, they also needed a team to quickly come together around them. Now, with as close to a full lineup as they've had all season, Kendrick believes the Hornets may still have their best hockey ahead of them.

"They still haven't had a chance to be a cohesive unit," she said.

Kendrick hopes a strong Hornets team will help keep Oakville's local talent with their hometown team. That may have already begun with Kirsten Miller (Burlington) and Olivia Atkinson (Stoney Creek), who rank second and third in team scoring, returning to the Hornets organization this year after beginning their PWHL careers elsewhere.

Oakville had six players competing at the recent under-18 nationals in Calgary, but only one (Miller) who plays for the Hornets.

"We really want to set a precedent where the top-level Oakville players could play here," Kendrick said.

Trailblazers avenge lone loss in football final



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points against it this season. That came a little less than a month ago in a 27-16 Blakelock victory.

"We had them 16-13 at the half and we just couldn't stop their power running game," Luyks said.

This time, Iroquois Ridge held strong. The Tigers were limited to just seven first downs and Iroquois Ridge forced and recovered three Blakelock fumbles. They also did not allow the Tigers to complete a pass.

Luyks said defensive linemen Brendan Marner, Lucas Siemucha, Lucas Mitrovic and Booth did an outstanding job against the Tigers' running game. John Rizutti was limited to 66 yards and Clark Marner to 54.

"Those guys were getting into the backfield all day and they were able to stop them," Luyks said. "Those guys definitely came up huge."

Blakelock, looking to add a third straight junior title, came into the game having allowed only 25 points in eight games this season, including a 22-0 shutout of St. Thomas Aquinas in the semifinals.

Iroquois Ridge advanced with another low-scoring battle, downing Oakville-Trafalgar 9-7.

By avenging its only loss of the season, Iroquois Ridge won its first junior football title, to go with the senior Tier 3 title the school won in 2011.

Blakelock's Christian Altiparmakyan is wrapped up by Iroquois Ridge's Lucas Siemucha (62) with some help from Will Elliott (7) and Luke Grandy (88) in Wednesday's Halton junior tier 2 football final. Iroquois Ridge shut down Blakelock's running game in a 6-1 victory. | **photo by Eric Riehl — Oakville Beaver**

Laughton named captain of OHL team

Oakville's Scott Laughton has been named the captain for the Ontario Hockey League team in the Subway Super Series. The series features all-star teams from each of Canada's three major junior leagues playing against the Russian national junior team.

The first of two games against the Russian team was played last

night (Thursday) in Oshawa with the second game set for Monday in Sudbury.

Laughton was a first-round pick of the Philadelphia Flyers, who selected him 20th overall in the 2012 draft. In 20 games with the Oshawa Generals this season, the 19-year-old had 17 goals and 35 points to rank 11th in the league.

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