



Essex District High School Red Raiders boys' hockey team run through drills during a practice at Memorial Arena last week. The Raiders are heading to LaSalle Arena tomorrow night to take on Sandwich High School.

Raiders face off against tougher competition

BY DANIEL SCHWAB

The Essex District High School Red Raiders boys' hockey team is shaping up for some tough competition.

The team, last year's A/AA champion, has been moved up to the AAA/AAAA division this season where they'll face bigger schools.

Despite losing a number of veterans from last year's squad and being one of the smaller schools in the division, Raiders' coaching staff and players are still confident they'll be able to develop into a competitive hockey team.

On Nov. 28, the Raiders fell short to Villanova 3-1,

and head coach Don McDermott said the players are still working out a few kinks.

"Every year in the past we've always started out slow, it's an adjustment," McDermott said. "We've got a lot of Grade 9s and they're playing against 19-year-olds. The last one-third of the schedule we typically peak...we're on our way."

With a little more than 900 students, EDHS is lumped in with larger schools in the AAA/AAAA division that have as many 2,500 students.

Defenseman Brit Garon, 17, said as a player he's feeling some pressure to perform at a higher level.

"Essex has always had a good reputation," Garon said. "But we're probably the smallest school in the league."

Still, the prospect of playing against bigger schools hasn't shaken Garon's confidence.

"We'll be competitive," he said. "A lot of rookies have already stepped up. We're not nearly as big as we were last year but we're faster."

McDermott admits to being a little nervous at first with the move to AAA/AAAA.

But with a new camp of rookies and 14 returnees from last season, the squad is hard at work in practices.

"We've already improved 100 percent with practices," McDermott said. "We've always done fairly well. Essex has always been a hot

bed for effort and talent."

McDermott, who's been with the team for five years, said he looks to the veterans to guide the younger players early in the season.

"They learn by example; they'll listen to the older guys," he said. "One thing that hurts is, we've got a few guys who've moved up to Junior "C". But (high school hockey) is a stepping stone, if they advance - more power to them."

On the coaching end, McDermott said there's no pressure from the school for a repeat of last season.

"The goal for most kids is just to win," he said.

At this early stage in the season, McDermott said the strong points he's seen so far on the team are skating, goaltending and defence, with improvements to be made on the power play, and taking harder shots and making swifter passes.

"The guys understand what we want and they execute that very well," he said.

McDermott said he has no plans to modify his coaching style as a result of moving up in the league.

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