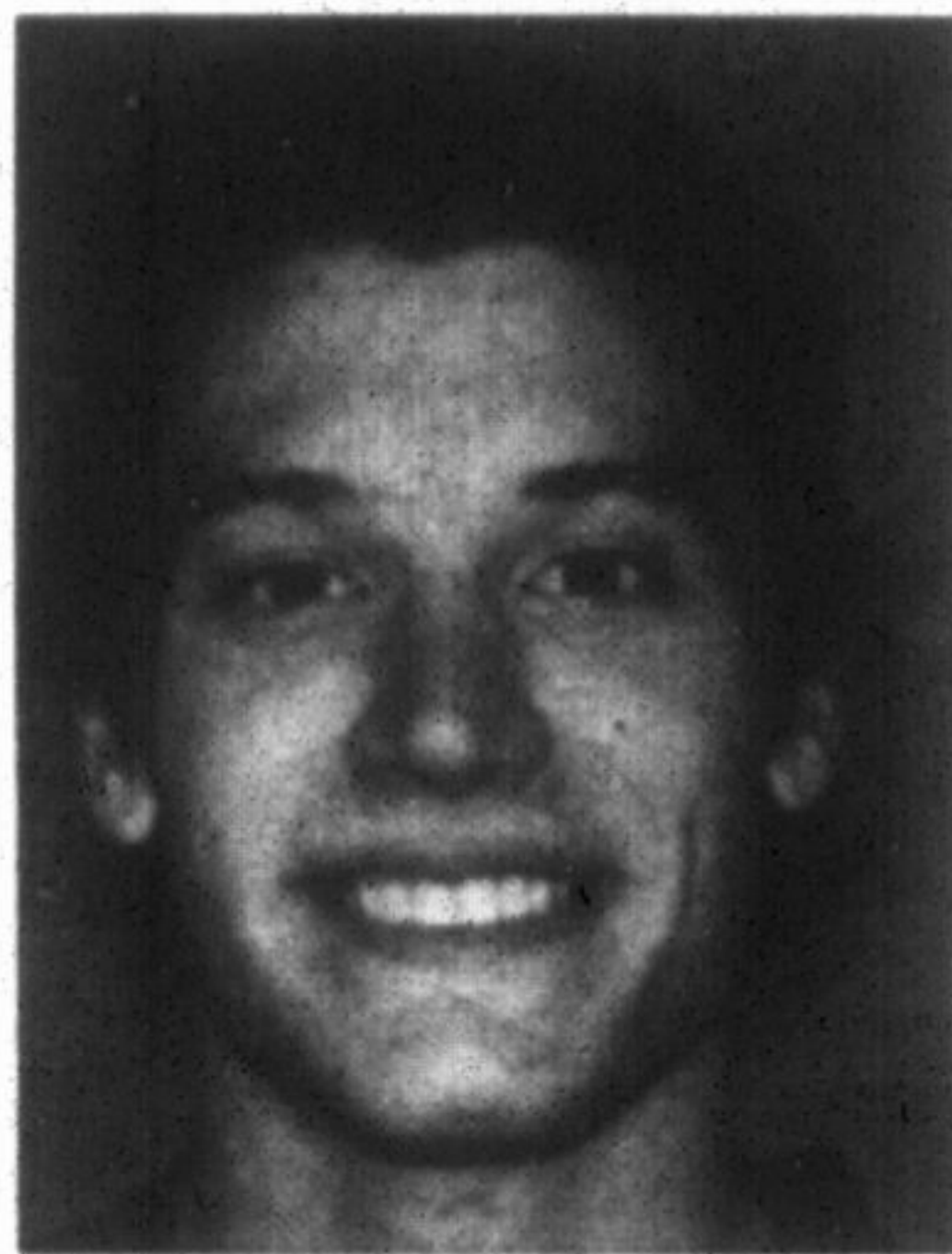


SPORTS: Linemates change, Finch keeps scoring

College coaches want Spirit veteran to be '200-foot player'

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CHRISTIAN FINCH: The defence-man-turned-forward continues to flourish this season.

After moving to forward from defence for the Stouffville Spirit last season, Christian Finch had what might be described as a breakout campaign with 29 goals and 54 assists in 50 regular season games.

But with two of his regular linemates in Matt Neal and Tyler von Engelbrechten having graduated from the tier two Junior A ranks to college/university teams, one of the biggest questions was if Finch could replicate those numbers.

With the regular season now past the midway point, the 20-year-old, third-year Spirit veteran has silenced any skeptics.

In 26 games, the six-foot, 186-pound Finch was the Spirit's leading point getter with 19 goals and 33 assists through Sunday's game and ranks among the league's scoring leaders.

NO SURPRISE

What Finch has accomplished so far this season hasn't surprised him at all.

"I'm a player who expects a lot out of myself," the Claremont resident said.

While crediting Neal and von Engelbrechten in helping him become the Spirit's second-highest scorer last regular season, Finch was quick to note much of what success he's attained so far this campaign could be attributed to skating alongside another set of good linemates.

This season, he's flanked by Chris Porter, who is also among the league's top scorers with 17 goals and 20 assists in 26 games. Centering the pair is Drake Caggiula, who recently returned to the Spirit after starting the season with the Des Moines Buccaneers of the United States Hockey League.

Having Caggiula return to the fold has been a blessing. He put up good numbers in his rookie campaign a year ago before suffering a concussion during the third round of the playoffs against the Newmarket Hurricanes.

"Chris (Porter) has been playing much better this year and with Drake (Caggiula) back it's a big step up because we needed a No. 1 centre. So far it's worked out well," Finch said.

At the same time, Finch was not intent on resting on his laurels of a year ago.

SCHOLARSHIP OFFER

Part of that included his acceptance of a full scholarship offer to attend Clarkson University in the fall of 2012 this past summer.

Finch logged extra time during the offseason working out with Spirit strength and conditioning coach Randy Smith at his Gormley facility.

In his conversations with the Clarkson hockey staff, Finch was quick to point out they wanted him

► The OJHL announced yesterday that Christian Finch has won the Gongshow Gear North-West Conference player of the month honours for scoring 17 points in seven games in November.

to be a more complete player upon his arrival to the Potsdam, N.Y., campus.

TWO-WAY PLAYER

"They wanted me to be a 200-foot player," he said in terms of being a good defensive and neutral zone player as well as what he could do in the opposition's end of the ice. "They want to make sure my defensive side of the game was there and I think they saw that in me last year during the playoffs."

Having played on the blueline certainly made things easier for Finch.

"By playing on defence, it made me realize how important positional play is," he said. "It's helped me for sure."

Spirit head coach Craig Donovan wasn't the least bit surprised at Finch's ability to perform as well as he did last season.

"A lot of people thought there might be a little drop off from an assist point of view because when Matt (Neal) was playing with Christian he could finish off plays.

"But with Drake (Caggiula) now on his line he's a highly skilled player and Chris (Porter) has been playing well. There's little if any dropoff in points.

"He might actually be ahead of where he was at the same time a year ago."

What Finch has done to improve himself this year, Donovan said, is in playing hard at both ends of the ice.

That was also a challenge the Spirit imposed on him.

"We challenged Christian to be a better all-around player in terms of what he can do in the defensive and neutral zone," cited Donovan. "To his credit, he's applied himself.

"I'm pleased with his play and he's definitely a better player this year."

Stouffville players added to all-star contest

The Stouffville Spirit will send four players to the inaugural Central Canada Cup Challenge later this month in Smiths Falls, ON.

Former Team Canada East player Paul Geiger, Drake Caggiula, Christian Finch and Chris Porter have been named to the Team North Division roster for the Dec. 27 to 29 tournament that will pit the Ontario Junior Hockey League's North Division all stars against teams from the Central Canada Hockey League, Northern Ontario Hockey League and the Quebec Junior A Hockey League.

The division-leading Newmarket Hurricanes will send nine players.

Hurricanes' goaltender Jason Pucciarelli and forwards Jeff DiNallo and Daniel Leavens, who were Team Canada East teammates of Geiger, will be joined by Matt Dineen, Adam Davies, Tyler Mort, Morgan Bonner, Bowman Webster and Chris Chiste.

Hurricanes head coach Brian Perrin and Huntsville Otters' Randy Salmon are the North coaches.

Forward Taylor McCloy of the Aurora Tigers is a coach selection.

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