

JR. A HOCKEY: Opens OJHL season at home tonight

Older Spirit hopes to return to playoff contention

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Can youth be served by the Stouffville Spirit during the 2013-14 Ontario Junior Hockey League season?

The Spirit hope to answer that question today when they open their regular season against the Milton IceHawks at the Stouffville Arena at 7:30 p.m.

Fielding a roster last season that was relatively young and a mere skeleton from the team that won the league championship the previous year, the Spirit missed the playoffs for the first time in recent memory.

But in returning 13 players with an additional year of tier two junior A experience under their belts, the Spirit hope the lessons learned from last year will earn them a passing grade.

For the Spirit, that would translate into an invite to the league's postseason party.

"We're definitely not as young as we were at the end of last year," Spirit head coach Jeff Perrin said. "With another year (of OJHL experience) among those returning, hopefully they're stronger and in

better shape and having the added year of maturity should help them.

"For us to make the playoffs, that's our main goal and it's a realistic one."

Yet, the Spirit are relatively young, at least by OJHL standards. Everyone on the roster is a teenager. Only Michael Stevens was born in 1993 — the final birth year of eligibility — and he doesn't turn 20 until Dec. 18.

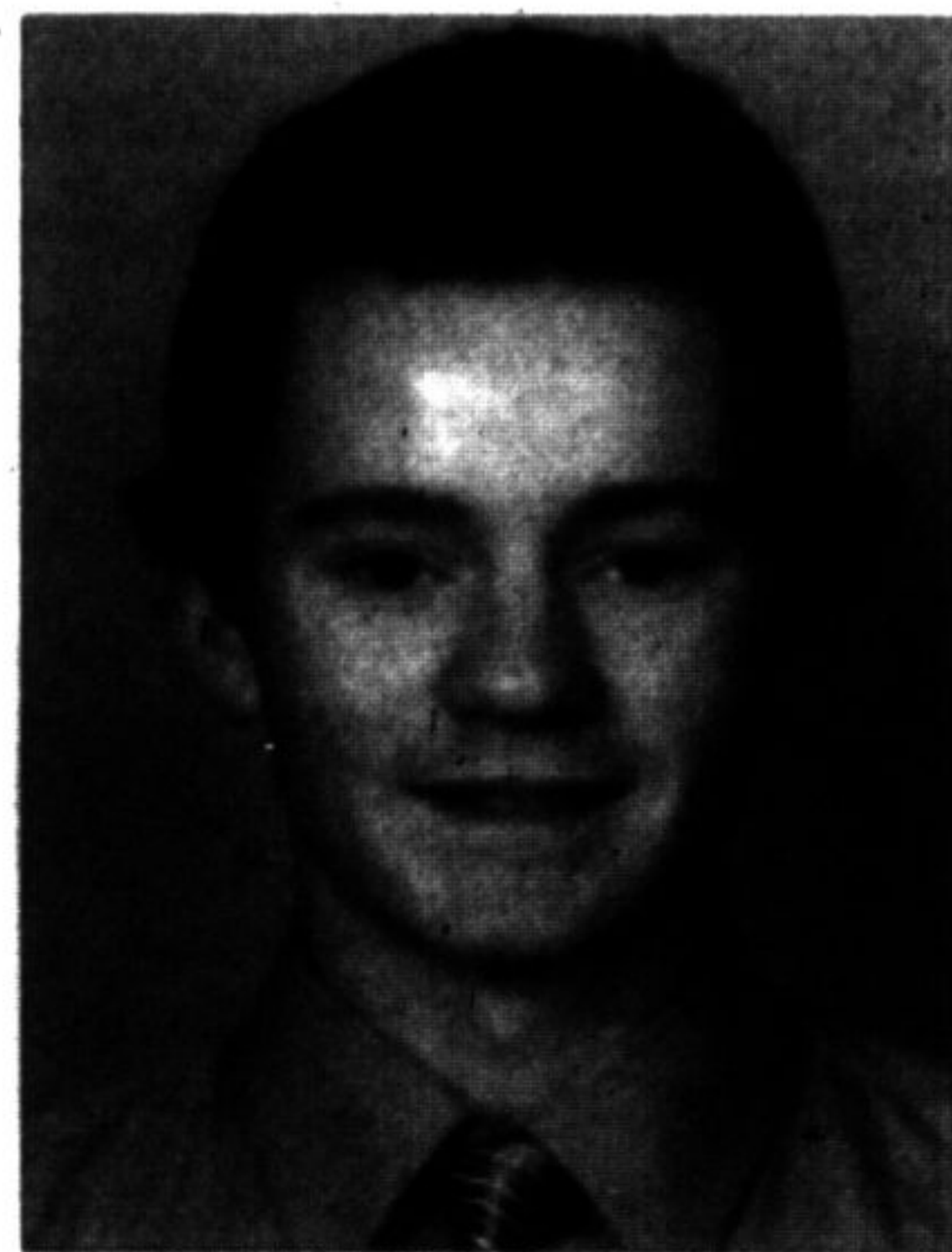
The rival Aurora Tigers and Newmarket Hurricanes each have seven 1993-born on their rosters.

Still, the added experience on the Spirit's roster is evident at every position.

Daniel Mannella has returned and will be the club's No. 1 net-minder.

"He will be our main guy," Perrin said of the 18-year-old Woodbridge resident who was acquired from the Georgetown Raiders part way through last season and sported a 3.50 goals against average and .896 save percentage in 23 tilts with the Spirit.

Backing up Mannella will be Tim Bester, a 17-year-old Waterloo native who played last season with the Guelph midjets.



MATT DUNLOP: Stouffville product one of 13 returning players on Spirit roster this season.

Four returnees will shore up the defence in captain Matt Heffernan, assistant captain Robert Powers, Dakota Redshaw and Stouffville resident Matt Dunlop.

New faces on the blueline include Brady Baker, Cameron Lintner and Kyler Challis.

Up front, the Spirit return assistant captains Daryl Thomson and Michael Stevens along with Justin

Wain, Peyton Backus, Mackenzie Wood, Joseph Deveny and Chad Burrows, nephew of Spirit co-owner and general manager Kenny Burrows.

First-year forwards who made the cut include Spencer Roberts, nephew of former NHLer Gary Roberts, Christopher Brill-Morgan, Connor Miller, Tyson Bruce, Nick Thomakos, Liam O'Dette and recently signed Carter Cummings and Michael Carcone.

"I feel things look promising," Heffernan said. "I feel we have a lot more depth this year and a core group of guys who aren't too old or too young. It's a good mix of experience and youth."

"I see a lot of good things. Right now, we just have to work out the bugs and kinks."

With the added year of experience, Perrin feels the biggest difference should transpire late in closely contested games.

"Even last year, the effort was there with our guys but with the lack of experience, we found ways to lose games. Hopefully with our team this year that will change," he said.

As for the other teams the Spirit

will face in the North Division this season, while Perrin conceded he hasn't had the time to look, he anticipates it will be no different than the past.

"Last year, every game was competitive, there were no easy games and we expect the same again this year," Perrin said.

Late roster moves

On a separate note, the Spirit made some last-minute roster moves including placing forward Stefan vonEngelbrechten on waivers.

The club signed 1996-born forward Michael Carcone, who returned from the Kingston Frontenacs' Ontario Hockey League camp and played last season at Hill Academy.

"He's fast, has good hands, works hard and has a lot of good skill," Perrin said of the Whitby resident.

As well, the club signed 17-year-old forward and Richmond Hill native Carter Cummings, who was an affiliate call-up player with the Spirit last season and played with the South Central Coyotes midjets.

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