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Off the Crossbar: Defense rests? Not for the Little Red girls hockey team

*By Brandon Thomas
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ITHACA — The million-dollar question was posed to both head coach Paul Zarach and assistant coach Lindy West: How will the Ithaca High girls hockey team survive with a rotation of three primary defensemen?

The answer, while not entirely verbalized, was clear — senior captain Erin Grainger, junior Colleen Dillon and eighth-grader Serena Mendola had better be ready for a workout.

If nothing else, the Little Red's move to shift sophomore Nitsan Goldstein to center speaks volumes about two things — the team's confidence in the trio of blueliners and its emphasis on trying to generate more goals this season.

"Our defense is our strong point," Zarach said. "Yes, they're going to get a lot of ice, but they're among the tops in the league."

The move frees up Goldstein to skate more regularly at forward, where she was used at times last season. She'll center a line with freshman Allison Grippin and eighth-grader Gwen Umbach on the wings, while the other primary line will consist of sophomore Carrie Wilder between eighth-grader Jackie Cornell and freshman Krystalyn Yonkin.

More offense is certainly at the top of the team's to-do list.

"We need to be more creative on offense and take more shots," Zarach said. "Last year, the average shots were around 40-plus against to 10. So when we're coming into the zone, we need to not look for that perfect shot, crash the net and look for rebounds."

But perhaps the most significant change will be in goal, where sophomore Angela Everhart takes over for the departed Jenni Hamel, who now plays for Northwood Academy.

"She's more than capable of being a No. 1," Zarach said. "When she's had some opportunities to play over the years, she's shown she can do it."

Grainger agrees.

"Last year, when we played Potsdam ... Angela came in and only let in one goal," she said.

The other big change this season is in the league itself. The Upstate New York Girls High School Hockey League has expanded once again, adding four schools this season — St. Lawrence Central, Chazy, Alexandria Bay/Thousand Islands and the Academies of Albany.

The additional teams have allowed the sprawling league to form three divisions. While all 13 teams will still play each other one or two times apiece in the 19-game regular season, travel will be reduced

and the playoffs will be regionalized. The top two teams from each division will receive automatic berths, as will the next two highest point-getters.

Ithaca is in the West Division with Skaneateles — a team it unofficially defeated in Monday's scrimmage, 6-2 — Oswego and ABTI.

The Little Red was 3-11-2 last season and finished eighth, declining an invitation to the playoffs. But it's looking forward to the challenge of getting back to the postseason this year.

"I think we have a chance, especially with the new division thing," Grainger said.

The long road home

And you thought your holiday travel was bad?

Getting to and from Grand Forks, N.D. for its games last weekend against the Fighting Sioux was no easy task for the Big Red men's team. Cornell practiced early last Wednesday, bused to Hamilton, Ontario, flew to Winnipeg, then bused across the border again to its final destination.

The return trip was broken up slightly by the team's decision to bus from Grand Forks to Winnipeg after the game Saturday, but Sunday's trek was still a 12-hour marathon.

Once across the border near Buffalo, the Big Red bus ran into traffic bloated with holiday travelers and Bills fans returning home to points east of town.

"It was definitely a long trip. When you have to bus then fly then bus again for two days, it takes such a toll on you," co-captain Colin Greening said.

But long-term effects don't seem to be of any concern.

"Everyone got some good rest (Monday)," Greening said. "We didn't do a lot of battle drills in Monday practice, which really helped, and got back (Tuesday) and everyone seemed to be in good shape."

Welcome back

Most college hockey players must love the thought of never taking the ice again at Lynah, so it must have been a strange week for Clarkson graduate Michael Grenzy.

The second-year professional who now plays with the ECHL's Florida Everblades was back in town for team practices Monday and Tuesday mornings at Lynah.

The Everblades are owned by Craig Brush, a 1972 Cornell graduate who played on the NCAA championship team from two seasons prior. His team is in the midst of a brutal nine-game road trip, which includes a contest tonight at Elmira.

Another Clarkson graduate, goalie David Leggio, has also been on the Everblades' roster most of this season, but he was recalled to Albany of the American Hockey League before the Lynah practices.

The versatile Ferro-Murray

Tyler St. Denis scored twice and Gabe Mendola dazzled with an end-to-end goal late in the second period, but Mark Thompson's goal was just as important in the Little Red boys team's 4-4 tie with

Albany-based Christian Brothers Academy on Saturday.

And the man behind the scenes was none other than Erin Ferro-Murray, who won a neutral-zone faceoff and made a slick move just inside the blue line to give Thompson space in the slot.

Coach Rich Armstrong said he wasn't sure what kind of role Ferro-Murray would have heading into the season, but the senior center is proving his worth.

"He's been the kid we rely on to do a variety of things for us," Armstrong said.

Quick shifts

* North Dakota is scheduled to reciprocate the Big Red's trip out west with games at Lynah next season. The tentative dates for those games are Jan. 22-23, 2010.

* The Cornell women's team split a pair of home games with Niagara last weekend.

The Big Red was doomed three power-play goals by the Purple Eagles on Saturday, but took advantage of a five-minute major penalty against the visitors Sunday. Trailing in the latter half of the third period, Cornell rattled off two goals on the ensuing power play and tacked on another one a second after the penalty expired in a 5-3 victory.

Additional Facts

On the ice

Cornell men's hockey

Record: 5-1-2 overall, 4-0-2 ECAC Hockey

Ranking: 13th (down from 12th last week)

Upcoming games

* vs. Clarkson (2-7-3, 1-5), 7 p.m. Friday

* vs. St. Lawrence (5-7-1, 1-4-1), 7 p.m. Saturday

Of note: The Golden Knights are winless in their last seven games, a stretch that includes just a one-point home weekend against Canisius. ... While the Saints have struggled in-conference, they have victories over Big East foes No. 19 New Hampshire and then-ranked Massachusetts.

Cornell women's hockey

Record: 5-5-1 overall, 2-3-1 ECAC Hockey

Upcoming games

* at Clarkson (8-5-3, 4-1-1), 7 p.m. Friday

* at No. 3 St. Lawrence (10-2-2, 5-1), 4 p.m. Saturday

Of note: The Saints are unbeaten in their last 11 games (9-1-1), with a home sweep of No. 5 Dartmouth and No. 10 Harvard mixed in. ... Big Red forward Catherine White ranks fourth in the country in points for game among freshmen (1.36).

Ithaca High boys hockey

Record: 2-1-2 overall, 1-0 CNYHSHL Div. I

Upcoming games

* vs. Auburn (1-2, 0-0), 7:30 p.m. Tuesday at The Rink

Of note: The Little Red opened league play with a 2-1 win at Oswego on Tuesday (see page XC). ... Senior goalie Zach Wilder has a 2.37 goals-against average and .912 save percentage. ... The Maroons recently split with Section 2's Shenendehowa and Christian Brothers Academy (of Albany) — two teams the Little Red recently tied.

Ithaca High girls hockey

Record: 0-0

Upcoming games

* vs. Salmon River (0-1), 7:30 p.m. Thursday at Cass Park

* vs. Massena (0-0), 2 p.m. Friday at Lynah Rink

* at Skaneateles (0-0), 4:30 p.m. Tuesday

Of note: The Shamrocks are the five-time defending state champions, but lost to expansion team Chazy in their opener, 2-1. It was Salmon River's first loss since Ithaca beat it in 2005. ... The Little Red unofficially beat the Lakers in a scrimmage Monday, 6-2.

— Brandon Thomas
