

Junior C Preview



ADRIENNE EISEN Sentinel-Review

Woodstock Navy Vets head coach and general manager Jeff Morrison (right) and assistant coach Adam Wallace (second from right) assess player skills during their first exhibition game of the year against Simcoe Storm. The same teams will meet in tonight's season opener at 7:30 at Southwood Arena. Norwich hosts Aylmer tonight at 8 p.m.

Norwich Merchants

CORY SMITH
Sentinel-Review

NORWICH — In his first year as the Norwich Merchants head coach, Steve Polgar is relying heavily on his veterans. Good thing, because those returning for another season in red and white have plenty of motivation.

Norwich suffered a shocking playoff collapse in 2010-11, blowing a 3-1 series lead to Grimsby and losing the Niagara League final in seven games. Grimsby went on to capture the Schmalz Cup, another blow to a record-setting Norwich team that had only twice in regulation in 36 regular season games (32-2-2).

"I think we're going to have a competitive team," Polgar said. "I don't know if we'll be as strong as last year. We were a very mature team last year. We had eight guys competing for the overage spot (this season). We've gotten a little bit younger so that's something we'll have

to work hard at to compensate for our maturity last year."

Norwich had eight impressive 16-year-olds at camp but because of league rules could only keep one. Polgar expects second-year players like Cole Vinnai to make significant strides this season. The 17-year-old scored 11 goals and 17 points in 20 games last year.

"(He's) a good player, good skater," smart player," Polgar said. "For one of the young guys I think he's going to have a good year."

The Merchants have four overagers returning, including two of their top scorers from last season. Curtis Logan is back for his third season in Norwich. The 21-year-old from Woodstock tied Simcoe's Tristan Lysko with 31 goals to lead the Niagara League. Logan finished with 57 points, which was third in the NDJCL and first in the Niagara West division.

Bryan Phillips brings his 17

goals and 50 points back to the Merchants. The Norwich native was a force in the playoffs, scoring 15 goals in 15 games.

Defencemen Jake Jefferies (1G, 22A) and Chris Logan (2G, 6A, 82PIM) will add experience and depth to the blue-line.

Matt McGonigle will once again be the team's starting goalie. The 20-year-old Stratford native had an incredible campaign last season, going 23-0-1-3 with a 1.82 goals-against average and .919 save percentage.

McGonigle was in net when the Peach Kings scored in overtime of Game 7 to stun Norwich on home ice. It's a memory Polgar hopes McGonigle and the rest of the Norwich veterans use in their quest for a Junior C title.

"They know what it takes to win and that's definitely an asset that will help us this year," he said. "They got a little bit of a feel for it, a taste for it, and I'm sure the guys want to make up for that. They've had a good work ethic and attitude at camp. The guys are hungry and hopefully that carries into the season and playoffs."

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Woodstock Navy Vets

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Sentinel-Review

WOODSTOCK — It's not hard to identify areas of improvement for a team that had seven wins in 36 games and finished last in its league. But if the Woodstock Navy Vets had one major area of concern last season, it was goals against.

The Navy Vets allowed a Niagara District Junior C League worst 199 goals in 2010-11. Playing from behind meant near certain defeat for a club that also scored a league low 102 goals.

To remedy the problem, Woodstock's coaching staff aggressively recruited new talent to join returning players with a year of experience beneath them.

"I think we're in a good spot," Navy Vets head coach and general manager Jeff Morrison said. "We're a lot deeper than we were at this time last year. The midget program is stronger this year and we've got three or four kids we can call up."

In goal, the Navy Vets have a new tandem in 16-year-old Tillsonburg native Jack Moylan and Jordan Inrside. Moylan, who will get the start in tonight's season opener at Southwood Arena against Simcoe (7:45 p.m.),

is a six-foot-five Kitchener Rangers draft pick.

Inrside is coming off an excellent season with the Southern Ontario Junior Hockey League's Hagersville Hawks, in which he posted a 2.57 goals-against average and league-leading .921 save percentage.

"It gives the guys a lot more confidence knowing no matter who is in net it will be a solid performance," Morrison said. "It helps to have somebody back there who can cover up the mistakes from someone up front."

The blue-line should also be improved, with captain Devon Young and veterans Andy Fallowfield, Bryn Shultz and Kyle Jones returning. Ben Thornton comes to the Vets from Cambridge (Greater Ontario Junior Hockey League) while Garrett Fisher, who split last season between Norwich and Hagersville, brings size (six-foot-four, 205-pounds) to the back end.

Up front, the Navy Vets have leading scorer Derek Cowing

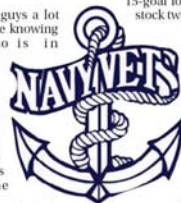
back. Top-10 scorers Kyle Morris, Kyle Robertson, Dylan Lazarus and Mackenzie Langford have also returned. Christian Babb rejoins the team after spending last season with GOJHL Lambton Shores. Morrison is hopeful the 20-year-old can return to the 15-goal form he had in Woodstock two years ago.

"We're bigger and faster than last year, more physical than we were last year," Morrison said. "We're not going to get pushed around as much as we did last year, that's for sure."

The key for Woodstock will be getting off to a better start than it did in 2010-11, when it lost its first eight games. Preparation and work ethic will determine the team's success, Morrison said.

"The biggest thing is to play with confidence," he said. "Most of the guys are returning or have junior experience so the one factor of junior won't be through the entire roster like it was last year."

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Simcoe Storm

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QMI Agency

SIMCOE — Simcoe changed its philosophy last season under new coach Paul Jones, and isn't wavering on sticking with local players this fall.

Port Dover native and newly named captain Connor Robinson will lead a group of six Norfolk County-born forwards. The club will lean heavily on last year's three leading scorers — Tristan Lysko (31G, 18A), Pat Ferguson (11G, 37A) and Corey Bethune (15G, 26A).

Gone is the team's top defensive pairing from a year ago in Justin Prittle and Jon Conrad. In their place, Simcoe has added former St. Thomas Junior B rearguard Keenan Hall, and expect local products Alex Gamble and Steve Barati to play more expanded roles.

Woodstock's Alex Gegeny (12-10-0, 4.14 GAA) returns behind the pipes following a solid regular season and spectacular performance in the playoffs. Former Port Dover Sailors tender Alex Stephens will serve as the backup.

Jones is looking for his club to give its star keeper more help entering this season. "They've been dedicating themselves to back-checking," he said.

"(We'll focus on) taking care of our own zone and taking chances when we get them."



Aylmer Spitfires

JACOB ROBINSON
QMI Agency

AYLMER — Close to 10 players return from an Aylmer team that made things interesting with the eventual champs from Norwich in Round 2 of the playoffs. This club is constructed from goaltender Brian Valentine out, but feels it has added plenty of depth up front.

About half of Aylmer's forwards are back from last season, including leading point getter Curtis Maracle (20A, 30A). The speedy group will also contain veterans Scott Mugford (13G, 13A) and former St. Thomas Star Rhys Thornton. The Spitfires attack is younger than a season ago, and hopes to increase the lowest goal total of the top four teams in the conference (130).

The top four Spitfires defencemen return this season. They've also signed former Star Mike Lynch and local Josh Hamilton. The Spitfires allowed the fourth fewest goals (114) of any team in the entire Niagara Junior C loop.

That low goal total was also thanks in part to league MVP Brian Valentine. Armed with a 2010-11 record of 15-10-2 to go along with a 2.77 goals-against average and .894 save percentage, Valentine will once again team with Lucas Easterbrook (3-2-2, 4.20 GAA).



New Hamburg Firebirds

CORY SMITH
Sentinel-Review

NEW HAMBURG — The Firebirds experienced a breakout season in 2010-11. After finishing fifth in the Niagara West Division three seasons ago and fourth in 2009-10, the Firebirds jumped to second last season. New Hamburg's 24-10-2 record was third overall in the NDJHL.

It failed to translate into playoff success, however, as the Simcoe Storm eliminated the Firebirds in games.

Twenty-plus goal scorers Mitch Wood and Trevor Sweetland led New Hamburg offensively last season. Both are eligible to return. Mike D'Alasio, Brock Shoemaker and Damien Parent also reached double digit scoring totals.

The Firebirds will have to move on without standout goalie Corey Moore. In his final season, Moore posted a 16-9-2-1 record with a 2.57 goals-against average and .893 save percentage. He struggled in the playoffs as his numbers fell to 3.77 and .873, respectively.

On defence, Russ Soehner is lost to age. In 29 games, Soehner tallied six goals and 14 assists and was a physical presence, accumulating 95 penalty minutes.

Brock Yantzi is eligible to return for a third season. The 20-year-old blue-liner has tallied 35 points in 66 regular season games during his first two seasons.

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Paris Mounties

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PARIS — Despite some off-ice turmoil where the club nearly fell left, the Mounties managed to take a step in the right direction in 2010-11, finishing with 10 wins and getting out of the league basement, a position they occupied for the previous three seasons.

Up front, the club has many veterans still in camps at the Junior B and A levels. The team has added Kyle Bezruki (6G, 10A in 32 games) of the Kitchener Junior Rangers triple-A midget program.

On defence, "It's really a 50/50 thing," said director of hockey operations Bryan Stevens.

In goal, Paris has second-year tender Stephen Palenik (4-10-0, 4.26 GAA) back in the fold for this season. The club also has a line on a keeper fresh out of a university camp that could play with Palenik, a Waterloo native.

Though their roster is in a state of flux, the Mounties, who will be coached by owner Tim Macdonald this season, are shooting for another move up the standings. The team will play this season in the brand new Brant Sports Complex.

