

Navy Vets usher in new era against Mounties

CORY SMITH
Sentinel-Review

WOODSTOCK — The Woodstock Navy Vets are back.

How they'll look is anyone's guess.

The blue and white anchor-embellished jerseys will return when the Navy Vets host the Paris Mounties tonight at 7:45 p.m. at Southwood Arena, but fans might want to buy a program to figure out the bodies filling them. Many of last year's players are gone, lost due to age, trades or plucked by Junior B teams, while the coaching staff and management underwent another turnover.

What they lack in experience, however, they make up for in exuberance. Woodstock is coming off a third-place finish (19-13-4).

"We're going to be young," head coach and general manager Jeff Morrison said. "We're going to compete every night. We've shown that through the exhibition schedule. We showed some toughness as well. We're not going to be pushed around. I think we have some of the faster guys in the league and we're going to use that to our advantage."

When Morrison and assistant coach Ed Cook took over the team, they made it clear they valued players who wanted to play for the right reasons.

"There's a few players who wanted out and we haven't done anything to keep them," Morrison said. "We're not paying anybody to be here. Everybody who is here is here because they want to be. Anybody who was eligible to return and aren't returning didn't want to be here."

Woodstock won both of its exhibition games against the Simcoe Storm and impressed Morrison with their development.

"The players played better than



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Simcoe goalie Chris McCoubrey gets his blocker in the way of a Dylan Lazarus shot during Saturday night's exhibition game.

anticipated," he said. "We seem to be further along than we expected to be at this point. There's a lot of talent there we just have to get them to perform every night."

Half the roster has never played junior hockey, which is a mixed blessing.

"There is no fear of the opponents," Morrison said. "They don't

have any playoff disappointments because it's their first year."

Goaltender Neil Pitcock, defencemen Andy Fallowfield and Devon Young (also the captain) and forwards Christian Bab, Spencer Sweazy and Travis Horvath are the only returnees.

There is an emphasis on local players as well, with 15 players

signed from Oxford County. Five of them — Dylan Lazarus, Chase Thornton, Bryn Shulz, Kyle Robertson and Derek Cowing — spent last season with the Woodstock Minor Hockey Association mid-levels.

"It's really important to keep the local kids here," Morrison said. "We want to see them develop

and move on as far as they can. The coaching staff feels it's important to give Woodstock kids a place to play. We feel like we can have a good nucleus of Woodstock kids like it used to be."

Morrison wants his team to utilize the Olympic-sized rink at Southwood Arena, but added

there is enough size to compete on smaller ice surfaces like Paris.

"I think our systems are going to be defence-first hockey, take care of our own end," Morrison said. "As the season progresses we'll crank up the offence a little bit. You try to go all offensive in this league as young as we are and it would be a mistake. Defence wins championships."

The goal remains constant development and a third-place finish behind Norwich and

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Navy Vets head coach and general manager Jeff Morrison

Simcoe.

"Until somebody knocks them off those are the teams to beat," Morrison said. "I think it will be a balanced league this year."

A portion of tonight's ticket sales will be donated to the Hawkins Family Memorial Fund. Other community initiatives include free admission Nov. 12 for all league, Navy Club members and active military members. An Easter Seals night is scheduled for Dec. 10.

Proceeds from 50/50 draws all season will be donated to Woodstock minor hockey.

"For the long-term success of the team, we are part of the community and we need to give back to those who helped us over the years," Morrison said.

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Norwich Merchants set to defend Niagara West title

NORWICH — The Norwich Merchants will begin defence of their Niagara and District Junior C West division title tonight against the Simcoe Storm.

With the departure of captain Steve Boyd, assistant captains Chad Borsley and Nathan Gearlinks to age, as well as Kris Krolouski, the Merchants had some holes to fill.

The Merchants added forwards Todd Poirier and Cole Vinnai from Brantford AAA. Vinnai is the younger brother of former Merchants goaltender Cody Vinnai. Former Burlington Bulldog Justin Lehman, of Woodstock, and Ingersoll's Drake Morrell will join returning forwards Bryan Phillips, Tom Brady, Stuart Preston, Derek McDougall, Mike Reby, Addison Fisher, Curtis Logan, Mike Brillante and Brett Green.

Todd Kemp, Aaron Wirth, Ben Pearson and Chris Logan are back on the blue line, along with newcomers Mark Hazeleger, a former Woodstock Renegade who played Junior C for the Bleinheim Blades last season. Brantford AAA grad Jacob Shira, and Garrett Fisher, who played in Cambridge in 2009-10, round out the defence.

Second-year Merchant Matt McGonigle and Zack Eastveld, another Brantford AAA grad, will handle the goaltending duties.

"I will be looking for the veterans to step up and lead the way, help the younger players along and work as a team," Norwich head coach Chad Paton told the Norwich Gazette. "We have a lot of speed and size and in our smaller rink that can work to our advantage. We have a tough defensive team that will take care of their own end first and the offence will take care of itself."

PARIS MOUNTIES

The Paris Mounties will have 10 new players and a new head coach when they open the regular season tonight in Woodstock.

Newcomers include Nick Brimmer (Brantford 99ers), Mick Sinn-Dunn (Cambridge Hawks AAA), Tyler Eckert (Waterloo

Wolves Midget AAA), goal-tender Lee Doherty (Guelph Storm draft pick), Wade Metz (Hespeler Minor Hockey), Andrew Brubacher (Elmira), Dylan Jones (Mississauga Senators AAA), And Merrit Crumback.

Crumback is one of four Paris teens who tried out for the Mounties this year.

"Merrit attended our battle camp this summer and that is when we first noticed him," Tim Macdonald, Mounties' general manager and part owner, told the Paris Star. "He came out and practised with us last season and has worked very hard. He deserves a spot on this team."

Macdonald and the rest of the Mounties coaching staff have been in contact with Mark Ford, head coach of the Paris midget team, with hopes of turning more Paris minor hockey players into future Mounties.

"There are two players in the midget program that we will be watching closely this season," Macdonald said.

Lee Rowland, Robert Eaton, Drew Priestap, Brandon Pinksen, Joel Hoekstra, Andrew Pawluk, Erich MacKinnon, Andy Liboiron, Ryan Morrison and Morgan Spratt are back with the Mounties, who also added head coach Bryan Jackson.

Paris split two exhibition games with the Niagara League champion Grimsby Peach Kings.

Macdonald said he is optimistic his veteran squad can build on last year's improved record.

ALYMER SPITFIRES

Having spent a number of seasons near the top of the Niagara West division, the Alymer Spitfires underwent a rebuilding phase last season.

Beginning in 2008-09, when the Spitfires lost several veterans, the club has gradually watched its top players lost due to age.

The rebuilding started two seasons ago and bottomed out last season when the Spitfires earned 28 points. It was a far cry from 2007-08 when the Spits, under

then-GM and current Navy Vets boss Jeff Morrison, wrestled first place from Norwich and Simcoe.

The decline started in 2008-09, with the loss of Rob Vanwynsberghe, Nathan Gavey, Jeff Gardner and Ryan Fletcher. Alymer collected 45 points, two ahead of Woodstock for third in the division.

Last season marked the departure of leading scorer Graham Spriel. The result was a fifth-place finish as the Spitfires scored 124 goals, the fewest of six Niagara West teams and second fewest in the Niagara League.

This season Alymer will have to do without three more of its key players.

No. 1 goalie Brandon Rohrer is gone after spending five years with the team. The Tilsonburg native went 9-14-2-1 last season with a 3.92 goals-against average and .894 save percentage.

Captain Adam Vandepoole is lost to age, along with his team-leading 44 points. Gone, too, is steady defenceman and assistant captain Derek McCaggart, who spent three seasons on the Spitfires blue-line.

Travis Schruder (11G, 32A), Curtis Maracle (20G, 16A) and Mark Pfohl (18G, 18A) are all eligible to return.

NEW HAMBURG FIREBIRDS

After a scrappy playoff run that extended to the second round, the New Hamburg Firebirds will attempt to pick up where they left off.

The Firebirds finished fourth in the Niagara West division but eliminated the Alymer Spitfires in a seven-game series. New Hamburg took Simcoe to six games in the division semifinal and almost pulled off an improbable comeback in Game 6 before falling short in its bid to extend the series to a seventh game.

Leading scorer Blake Jordan is back after scoring 19 goals and adding 25 assists last season. The Firebirds will need to replace the 21 goals from Colin Eby's departure, though Damien Parent (14G, 14A) also returned to the lineup.



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Norwich's Derek McDougall gets squeezed by Grimsby's Joe Young, left, and Adam Burt during the third period of Game 1 of the Niagara League championship last season.

Jay D'Aguiar, James Harrison, Brock Shoemaker and Tom Carruthers join Jordan and Parent as returning forwards. James Graham, Mitch Wood, Corey Nowak, Trevor Sweetland, Mike D'Aloisio, Taylor Wood and Kyle Mohr round out the roster up front.

The defence will return mostly intact as Matt Horst, Brock Yantzi, Brendan Lynch, Brandon Yantzi and Russ Soehner each played at least six games with the Firebirds last season. Defencemen Jake Pleon and Willie Buck have joined the team this season.

New Hamburg's strength will be in net, where Niagara West MVP Corey Moore returns. The overage posted a 10-10 record last year with a 3.19 goals-against average and .911 save percentage.

The Firebirds host Alymer in their season opener tonight before making their first trip to Simcoe Sunday in a playoff rematch.

SIMCOE STORM

With several roster changes and a renewed focus, new Simcoe Storm head coach Paul Jones feels good about the direction the club is taking.

"The culture of this team is changing, you can see it and hear it in the dressing room," Jones told the Simcoe Reformer. "It's a pretty vocal room, and the guys are pulling for each other. They're talking about each other's game and ways to improve, it's not so much 'me' talk anymore."

The Storm took full advantage of an extended exhibition schedule. The coaching staff got a chance to see different line combinations, how players responded in different roles and game situations, and where they fit amongst each other.

"Now that we're getting the roster all rounded out, we're start-

ing to see guys playing with who we signed them to play with," Jones said. "The young kids are playing well, and that's definitely good to see. We like that they're playing hard, and we like the big bodychecks we're seeing, because that's the type of physical presence we need to be successful."

The opening night lineup will include forwards: Pat Bates, Corey Bethune, Connor Robinson, Pat Fergus, Mac Wood, Jordan Paton, Braeden Shand, Evan Saunders, Craig Thompson, Colton Thornton, Tristan Lysko and Josh Birt. Justin Prittie, Jon Conrad, Steve Barati, Tyler Jones, Ryan MacGregor and Alex Gamble will patrol the blue-line.

The goaltenders will be returning vet Kris McCoubrey and Woodstock import Alex Gogey.

Simcoe will host the New Hamburg Firebirds Sunday at 7 p.m.