

Jan. 16 Ice Hockey

Notre Dame routs Nottingham in another unfortunate CVC mismatch

By Tony Piscotta

Fish4Scores.com

You'd think that after almost 30 years the powers-that-be that run the Colonial Valley Conference hockey league would make some adjustments.

But as Monday's ice hockey game between Notre Dame and Nottingham proved once again, they still have some work to do.

While every other league in the state avoids matching powerhouse teams against the weaker squads, the Colonial Valley Conference continues to play a cookie cutter schedule that almost guarantees "contests" like Notre Dame's 10-0 win over Nottingham.

To their credit both coaches, Nottingham's Alex Chis-Luca and Notre Dame's Andrew Dutko, did their best at keeping their teams under control and tried to put a positive spin on things.

"You never know from year to year," Chis-Luca said. "Last year they were strong but you're not going to change the schedule just because they're a strong team. They're in our league so we play them. You play the hand you dealt with and hope for the best."

In reality, there was very little hope for Nottingham.

The Northstars did not get their first shot until late in the first period and were out-shot 51-7 in the game. This despite the fact that Notre Dame did not play many of their top players, gave several junior varsity players an opportunity to play (the Irish are the only team in the CVC that plays a JV schedule), and started a senior goalie who sees little varsity action.

"It's tough. We try not to (run up the score). We played a lot of JV guys and one of our senior goalies (Louis Petersack) got to play and got his first shutout," said Dutko.

But Dutko, nor any of the other coaches of the top CVC teams are at fault.

The Colonial Valley Conference continues to have its weaker teams face every other team in the conference - resulting in predictable (and in some cases dangerous) mis-matches. As a result, the games serve little purpose for either team and leave parents, fans and players on both teams in a dour mood.

While Dutko would not criticize the current league alignment, he thought an upper tier and lower tier setup, similar to the way the majority of the leagues are set up, might be a better option.

"I'm a fan of it (setting up the league to be more balanced) but I just do whatever they tell me to do," said the Irish's second-year coach. "

In Notre Dame's case, it often has to play top caliber non-league teams after facing weaker CVC competition. Prior to playing the Lawrenceville School last week, the Irish handled Patriot Division foe Hightstown (which had one win).

Not surprisingly, Notre Dame got off to a slow start. This week the Irish face Nottingham and Lawrence in back-to-back games before taking on Gordon Conference power Seton Hall Prep.

For the Northstars, the prospects of playing Notre Dame and Hopewell Valley after gaining some confidence with a win over Jonathan Dayton last week would have to be discouraging to say the least.

Instead of balancing the league into two six-team divisions, and allowing teams to play 10 league games against teams of similar ability, and then using their discretion to fill out the schedule, the CVC continues with an out-dated three division set up.

As a result, there are 10-goal, "mercy rule" games seemingly every day and an almost

meaningless "championship" in the four-team Patriot Division (Steinert is currently in first with three league wins).

But to their credit, while the Northstars have no control over whom they play, they played a discipline game and competed as well as could be expected.

"They played hard and they never gave up," said Dutko. "They played us tough in the first period."

Northstars goalie Kyle O'Byrne recorded 15 saves in the opening period and Nottingham was able to keep the puck on the perimeter – allowing the "Stars to trail "only" 3-0 after one. But Nottingham rarely got out of its own end and did not test Petersack until the second period.

The Northstars had two quality chances in the second - the first coming early in the period when Matt McNeal had a semi-breakaway and then the second when junior Kyle Ballschneider had a quick shot from the top of the right circle and Jake Andrejck crashed into the net trying to get the rebound. Petersack made the stop on both plays.

But the differences in teams became apparent in the second period. With the score 6-0 and the Northstars on a power play, Notre Dame scored two short-handed goals. The Irish nearly scored a third short-handed goal with 16.4 seconds left in the period but O'Byrne made a point blank save on Notre Dame's Tyler DeLorenzo.

"It's a learning experience. You have to play hard every single shift," said Chis-Luca, who felt that the difficult schedule may have contributed to the Northstars' win over Jonathan Dayton. "If you look at the Dayton game, they were a team that had scored two goals all year and they scored two against us.

"If we didn't play hard and play hard for three periods and for all 45 minutes we don't win the game."

Unfortunately, while their spirit and work effort is commendable, there is little in the long history of the CVC hockey league to suggest that "playing hard" will lead to positive results when it comes to facing teams with far more experience and ice time.

The players and coaches continue to put forward a top effort. Now they could use a little help from the professionals and administrators in charge of running the CVC to make it worthwhile.