

Jan. 26 Ice Hockey

A different St. Joseph's team has its way with Nottingham this time

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Fish4Scores.com

Jan. 26: What a difference a year - and six freshmen - makes.

Last season, St. Joseph-Hammonton finished 0-9 and were one of three teams the Nottingham ice hockey team defeated, falling 4-3 in a late season clash.

Despite showing up for today's contest at Mercer County Park with just 10 skaters in front of freshman goalie Zack McCloskey, the Wildcats quickly jumped out to a 4-0 lead in the game's first five minutes and thoroughly dominated a Nottingham lineup playing without two seniors.

The Northstars (2-15) were out-shot by St. Joseph in the first period (19-4) and trailed 7-0 en route to a 10-0 loss that ended when Wildcats senior Frank Sabato scored with just under four minutes remaining in the third period.

"I expected us to come out better. Considering who we just played (CVC heavyweights Notre Dame and Princeton) and that Hightstown had just beaten (Saint Joseph) I thought we'd have a better chance today," said Stars head coach Alex Chis-Luca.

But while the Wildcats' lineup was small in numbers and coming off a 5-3 loss to a Rams' team that Nottingham defeated during the Hamilton Holiday tournament, it was clear that St. Joseph meant business - even before the game started.

Despite the long bus ride, the Wildcats were flying around during the warm-up and ready to go while Nottingham had not yet emerged from its locker room.

And the biggest difference between the two teams is the influx of talented first-year players such as McCloskey, forward/defenseman Paul Petrongolo and the rest of the half dozen freshman in the Wildcats lineup.

"Number thirteen (Petrongolo) was really good too," said Chis-Luca, when told that over half the St. Joseph team were freshmen. "We don't have guys coming in like that. We are basically working with the same group that we had last year. That's not knocking them, they work hard, but it's tough to build a program when players keep going elsewhere."

Sabato, who scored five goals and had two assists, is one of four seniors in the Wildcats lineup. He points to the influx of new players as the key reason St. Joseph is still alive for a possible berth in the New Jersey Public School tournament for the first time since the program made its debut in 2004-05.

"The freshman came up this year (and) it's been good. The last two years we had one win and last year we had no wins," said Sabato.

With the win against the Stars the Wildcats improved to 4-4-5 (including ties with CVC opponents Paul VI and Hamilton West). "It would be a lot better if we didn't tie five games. We played Paul VI to a tie and that was our biggest game."

The Wildcats have been successful at using a limited lineup. While a small roster can be a handicap, St. Joseph has been able to develop great team chemistry. It also helps that the Wildcats have two sets of brothers - Alex and Nick Corwonski and Matt and Tom Grzegorski - among their 10 skaters.

St. Joseph made several outstanding passing plays, particularly on the power play and in the offensive zone.

"We skate a lot of minutes but it's been that way for the last three years." said Sabato, "It's a different kind of ice hockey. Most teams have four or three lines but when you play just two lines you have to pace yourself."

For Nottingham, the game offered a lesson in what happens when one team is prepared to play and the other is not.

Fortunately, the Stars have an opportunity to get right back on the ice - playing Patriot Division rival Lawrence in a Senior Day contest Friday, 5 p.m., at Mercer County Park.

"I still have confidence in them and they have to take the confidence I have in them and believe in themselves," said Chis-Luca, while sharing the lesson his team should take from the game. "If they don't go out and play their hardest, games like this can happen.

"If they go out and take care of themselves game like this won't happen."