

Sports

McQuaid, Mooney beginning lax programs from scratch

By Richard A. Kiley

The two new kids on the block believe that the neighborhood may be a little rough on them early, but that — like most things in life — the situation should get better with time.

McQuaid Jesuit and Cardinal Mooney, two diocesan high schools that will be fielding lacrosse teams for the first time ever this spring, want Rochester-area lax teams to start recognizing them as lacrosse powers.

Well, maybe in a year or two.

And why not? Look at what Nazareth College lacrosse coach Scott Nelson has done with the Golden Flyers' program on the Division III level in less than three seasons. For those lax fans who've been in a cave for the past three weeks, Nazareth — still maybe considered a fluke by some traditionally strong lacrosse programs around the country — is ranked fourth in the nation among Division III schools, according to the latest United States Intercollegiate Lacrosse Association poll. One of the Golden Flyers' five wins this season came against Division III titan Salisbury State, 12-7.

It just goes to show that you can build something from nothing, which is exactly what both McQuaid and Mooney will try doing this year.

"I asked my kids to write down what experience they had playing lacrosse, and I got answers like, 'I've looked at sticks' and 'one hour with a stick,'" said new Mooney lax coach Mark Moran. "Very few of them have ever picked up sticks. It's like teaching a crash course."

Teaching players the game is one thing, but achieving success in an area where lacrosse reigns in the spring may be quite difficult — especially for McQuaid.

Because many of the students pushing to get a lax program started were going to be seniors this year, McQuaid principal Father Paul Nochelski, SJ, and Athletic Director Tim Jordan decided to begin the program at the varsity level. That may prove a tough task for coach Mike Schepis, who nevertheless appears unfazed by the situation before him.

"McQuaid's philosophy was that a lot of seniors were pushing to get a (lacrosse) program for two or three years, and that for (the administration) to go and say it's a JV sport would be a kick in the pants to the seniors," said Schepis, who played high school lacrosse at Immaculate Heart Central in Watertown. IHC is one of four independents playing in the Central City League with the likes of state-champion West Genesee — a "farm club" for top-ranked Syracuse University year after year — as well as schools like Syracuse Henninger and Watertown High.

Although Schepis brings with him a wealth of knowledge from playing three years on the varsity at IHC and even more with a men's club team in Watertown, his only coaching experience came in 1981 when he guided the JV team at IHC. That experience should only help him at McQuaid because, with the exception of a few seniors, the Knights are predominantly a team made up of freshmen and sophomores — much as a junior varsity team would be.

"We all realize we're in a different league right now than some of the teams we'll be playing," Schepis said.

Some 53 eager but green hopefuls came out for the team on March 7. Schepis has since cut that number almost in half. Injuries common to the physical and fast-moving sport have also taken their toll on the Knights. Joe Daggar, a senior midfielder with the best stick-handling abilities on the team, may miss the early part of McQuaid's inaugural season because of a back injury.

"We'll miss him a lot until he comes back," Schepis said. "The (back) injury doesn't look too serious, though."

But the McQuaid coach is also impressed with a core of freshman and sophomore players, who he admits frankly may take their lumps this season but should be giving some out next year and thereafter.

"I feel I have an advantage having ninth and 10th graders," he said. "That will be a big help down the road. We're looking at our 11 games as 11 scrimmages this year."

It appears the Knights' strength will be on defense, where — believe it or not — an eighth grader by the name of Brandon Piccavento will anchor the defensive core. A truck disguised in human form at 5-foot-11 and 170 pounds, Piccavento has attended lacrosse camp at the United States Military Academy at West Point. John Holpbe, a sophomore, should also see a lot of time on defense in front of goalie Matt Rizzo. The junior netminder tended goal for Al Vyverberg's hockey team this winter and has the mechanics and mindset necessary to



Bonnie Traflet/Courier-Journal

The Knights may stumble through their inaugural season on the lacrosse field, but a core of returning talent should make them a force to be reckoned with in seasons to come.

stand in front of zipping lacrosse balls.

Clay Berardi, a junior, provides adequate backup for Schepis.

Offensively, the Knights will be young. Freshman Steven Paul has nailed down one attack spot, as has senior David Holpbe. Daggar, sophomore Mike Diehl and senior Dennis Hyatt form a midfield capable of inflicting some damage.

Seniors Phil Pecora and Gerry DiMarco as well as sophomore Todd Dorschel make up what should be the second midfield.

"This will obviously be a building year for us, breaking into the varsity level with a lot of underclassmen," Schepis said. "Two years from now, though, I believe McQuaid will be able to run with the best of them."

The Knights will see some of Section 5's best as early as this season. McQuaid was scheduled to open up the season against powerful Irondequoit this week and will battle Fairport soon after. In all, the Knights will see Fairport twice, Rush-Henrietta — picked by some to win the sectional title — twice, as well as Pittsford, Bloomfield, Penfield and Jim Burns' Bishop Kearney team. One of the two games against Kearney, will be under the lights. It shouldn't take too long for the two Catholic high schools to begin a heated but healthy rivalry in lacrosse, much as they enjoy in other sports.

Because of continuing field renovations at the all-boys' school on Clinton Avenue, all of McQuaid's games will be on the road this season.

Mooney's Moran, who is also a native of Watertown, doesn't have quite the chore before him that Schepis does because his players will begin at the JV level. Ed Nietopski, athletic director at Cardinal Mooney, said he hopes the program will graduate to the varsity level as early as next year, though.

A 1977 graduate of Watertown High School, Moran is first cousin to Greg Capone, one of Schepis' two assistant coaches. (Eugene Lacolla is the other assistant.) Moran and Capone played midfield together at Watertown High School.

"He's got a tough situation over there at McQuaid; I don't know about starting a new program at the varsity level," Moran said.

The job in front of Moran is no day in the sun either. Mooney opens the season against Penfield on April 12, and Moran is still teaching the basics to the 27 players who came out for the team.

The Mooney coach said one of the positive aspects of starting a program from scratch is the competition for starting positions. Although many spots are still up in the air, the Mooney coach said his attack looks two-thirds complete with juniors Craig Kenney



C-J file photo

Both McQuaid's varsity and Mooney's junior varsity are looking forward to bumping shoulders with Bishop Kearney.

and Scott Bevilacqua.

The midfield unit is still wide open, but juniors Frank Amato, Brian Meyer and Bob Donatella have been impressing their new coach. Tony Floreano, whose brother Jason should see a lot of playing time on defense, is also fighting for a midfield spot.

—Like Schepis, Moran has also received some help from the ice team with juniors Chris Ranson and Keith Bell. Both played defense for Mooney hockey during the winter. Junior Mike Brookins will also see

playing time on defense.

Moran's long search for a goalie appears to be over with his discovery that freshman Greg Phillips has the quick reflexes needed to play between the pipes.

Mooney's schedule includes tough games against Irondequoit and Fairport JV teams. Rush-Henrietta (twice), Newark and Bishop Kearney are also on the slate.

"We'll look to learn the fundamentals and then take things from there," Moran said.

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