

Sports

29

The number of minutes played by senior forward Louis Birdsong against the Delaware Blue Hens after playing just 24 minutes in the previous three games.

Monday, February 1, 2010

On the Breakaway

Second-Year Roller Hockey Club Flourishes with Young Talent



Photo Courtesy: George Mason Roller Hockey Club

A member of Mason's roller hockey team faces off against an opponent.

BRIAN T. CHAN
Sports Editor

When sophomore John Liebold first came to George Mason University, he found out that the school did not offer a roller hockey program. Liebold, who played the sport for the past 14 years, was not ready to give up on hockey.

"In my freshman year, we just started a pickup league team at The Box in Chantilly. It was about the six of us, and we just asked Mason to start a club and went to [the club sports coordinator] Bob Spousta and made it happen for our sophomore year," said Liebold, club founder of the George Mason Roller Hockey Club.

The team, which started with six to seven people last year, has increased its membership to 17 players. The club recruited a player from Pennsylvania while the rest of the players were familiar with each other.

The club currently leads the Northern Conference in the Southeastern Collegiate Roller Hockey League (SE CRHL) with an 11-1-0 record and 22 points.

Mason leads the conference in scoring offense and scoring defense with roughly 7.2 goals scored and 2.5 goals allowed per game.

Mason opened this season lighting the lamp in a 13-2 rout over the Florida International Golden Panthers.

Currently ranked 10th in the

nation, Mason won its first 10 games in the 2009-10 season before falling 6-5 to the Division I N.C. State Wolfpack.

Despite surrendering a 5-2 lead to the Wolfpack, the team came back the next game and defeated the East Carolina Pirates 6-2.

In its inaugural season, Mason posted a 2-13-1 record and scored 58 goals while allowing 122 from the opponents. In just a year, the team has transformed into a high-scoring offense and goal-preventing defense.

"The key difference has been our coach, who has free time to come this year," said Liebold. "Last season, we didn't emphasize that he needed to be here. We like him to be there, but he has a tough schedule. Our coach has definitely helped us out a lot, strategizing our defense and making sure our lines are alright."

This year, Liebold has taken over a leadership role, which has reduced his playing time to about two to three shifts, but his passion for roller hockey has stayed with him throughout. Liebold and senior forward Dan Brooks have pioneered the hockey club at Mason.

Liebold started playing hockey as an 8-year-old, and until he turned 12, Liebold gave up baseball to focus more on hockey. At Chantilly High School, Liebold played both roller and ice hockey. When he came to Mason, Liebold continued playing in adult leagues.

On the offensive side, freshman defenseman Andrew Lensing and freshman forward Cameron Lensing each lead the

team with 18 goals, and Andrew, the team leader in points, is among the top five in the nation with five game-winning goals. Freshman defenseman Harrison Murdock has 15 goals entering the final stretch of the regular season, and freshman forward Mike Zyuzin, who scored five goals in this season's opener, is ranked 20th in the league with 13 goals.

"I've played with the Lensing twins since middle school, and they were in sixth or seventh grade," said Liebold. "Our freshmen here already know [their] friends from high school that are coming here, and we somehow got our name out and we've had people in Pennsylvania who are still contacting us."

Opponents have had difficulty putting the puck past Mason's top-notch goaltender, freshman Jordan Pohl. In 10 games, Pohl holds a 9-1 record and has stopped 198 of the 214 shots taken.

He also registered one shutout for this season. The 18-year-old is one of the top goaltenders in the SE CRHL,



Photo Courtesy: George Mason Roller Hockey Club

The roller hockey club shows potential with new talent this year.

leading the league with a 1.92 goals against average (GAA) and a 92.5 save percentage. On a national scale, he is the leader in save percentage and ranks third in GAA.

In addition to the strong goaltending from Pohl, the defensive line has been a major part in the team's ability to prevent the opponents from taking advantage of scoring opportunities.

"Based on our record, it was more about fun last year," said Liebold. "We got the experience, but it's a little different since we now have a decent team."

"This year's progress has been phenomenal. We picked up three or four of the best freshmen roller hockey players in the area; they made a

tremendous difference on the team in defense, offense and [in the goal]," said Liebold.

The team will wrap up its regular season schedule on Feb. 20-21 in Chantilly.

"I really think it's going to be a good program and I just hope that Mason realizes it," said Liebold. "It's going to be a big deal because we actually made this club legit for roller hockey and I would like to see it keep going."

In just its second year of existence, the club looks to build off its immediate success and continues to expand.

For more information on the club, visit <http://www.gmuohockey.com/roller>.