

HARD ACT TO FOLLOW

AS TORONTO'S ONLY CHAMPIONSHIP TEAM, THE TORONTO NATIONALS ARE EXCITED ABOUT ITS UPCOMING SOPHOMORE SEASON AND BRINGING HOME ANOTHER MAJOR LACROSSE LEAGUE TITLE

// By Roger Lajoie

The Toronto Nationals will have a hard act to follow this season – their own.

While just about every other professional sports team in Toronto struggles to even make the playoffs, the Nationals completed their first season in the Major Lacrosse League (MLL) in 2009 in grand style, capturing the league championship in thrilling fashion.

The Nationals got off to a quick start, winning four of their first five games, but endured a four-game losing streak in mid-season before getting their act turned around in time to close out the regular season with three straight wins. They followed that with two wins at the league's championship weekend.

"I think we got off to a faster start because we had a lot of guys who played in the NLL and that gave us a jump start on some of the other teams," says Nationals coach Dave Huntley. "We seemed to get a little tired and maybe a little stale around the middle of the season but it worked out pretty well in the end."

It certainly did. The Nationals picked up wins over Long Island, Boston and Denver to end the regular season and headed to the title weekend in Annapolis, Md., on a high.

That momentum really helped the team through two very tough games. Similar to the NCAA's Final Four basketball tournament, the top four teams hooked up in semi-final and final games to determine the league's playoff champion.

"One of the things that's very different about this league is the championship weekend, with two games in as many days, so it's tough," Huntley explains. "We prepare for it though by having a lot of players available and getting players into games so we'll have everybody ready for the end of the season."

That strategy worked perfectly. The Nationals were able to out-last Long Island 14-13 in a gruelling semi-final game and the next day, won another thrilling one-goal game, 10-9, over Denver to claim the championship.

"It's tough to get a team to come together in this league because of our schedules but we did," Huntley says. "We're only together



The 2009 version of the Toronto Nationals bask in the glory of their MLL championship



Brodie Merrill is back in 2010 to anchor the Nationals defence

for a few hours a week, as we usually practice once and play once a week, so to bring it together when it counted the most was huge."

Even with the team heading into 2010 on a high, it is best not to use the word repeat around Huntley. Of course he does feel that his team can win again, but he thinks every year is really starting from scratch when it comes to field lacrosse.

"I really never look at repeating as champions or being defending champions in a league like this because there are so many changes," insists Huntley. "We've had several

players leave us for various reasons and there's always a fair amount of turnover because of the nature of this league, so I don't really look at repeating because we've made some changes.

"But we're returning a lot of guys and that is a positive," he adds. "We also have a lot of young talent so we feel we can certainly be a strong team once again this year, but we will be different."

Star players Joe Waters and Jeff Zywicki are among the players who won't be back this year, but the club is returning playoff MVP Merrick Thomson, Shawn Williams, who scored the game-winner in the title game, and veterans Delby Powless, Brett Queener, Brodie Merrill, Gavin Prout and John Grant Jr., just to name a few.

In a move to reduce costs and create a better game day experience, the club has moved its home games to Lamport Stadium from BMO Field. Also, fans have a variety of ways to purchase tickets at several different price levels to come out and support the team this season.

The Nationals open their season at home on May 15 against the Chicago Machine. For more information on Toronto's latest championship team, check out the team's website at www.nationallacrosse.com. ♦

Roger Lajoie is a freelance writer in Toronto, Ont.