

NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK

IN ITS INAUGURAL SEASON IN THE MAJOR LACROSSE LEAGUE, THE HAMILTON NATIONALS ARE GETTING BETTER AS TIME GOES ON

// By Roger Lajoie

There is no doubt that the Hamilton Nationals are a work in progress.

Playing in a new venue and in a new city, and armed with a lineup filled with young players, everyone agreed that it was going to take some time for the Nationals to fully develop into a contending team. That's just the way it works with a young team in transition.

But the development is coming along just fine and after a rocky start to the season, the Nationals are clearly a team on the move as the Major Lacrosse League (MLL) season heads into its final month.

"We started slow, but with more than 10 rookies in the lineup we expected that," says Jody Gage, the Nationals' general manager. "There is such a difference between box lacrosse and field lacrosse, and an even bigger



Photos courtesy of the Hamilton Nationals



difference maybe between college field lacrosse and a pro league like this. We're starting to pick it up as our young guys get used to this league and it shows in the results."

It certainly has. After a 1-3 start to the season the Nationals won three straight games and appear to be a team buoyed with confidence as it heads to the stretch run of the MLL season and hopefully a playoff spot.

"I believe in my guys," says head coach Regy Thorpe. "I know the coaches, organization and owners do too. I think we're going to battle right to the end there. If we finish first, second, third or fourth, as long as [we] can get in there, [we] have a chance to win the championship.



“We’re just trying to go forward,” he adds, “and you can’t help but look over your shoulder at Long Island. We’re taking it one game at a time.”

While the development of the younger players has been a huge factor in the team’s turnaround, it’s veterans, like Joe Walters and Brodie Merrill, who have been leading the way.

Walters had 19 points during Hamilton’s recent three-game win streak, led the league in assists and was fourth in scoring after having won MLL titles in his last two seasons in the league (2008 and 2009).

Merrill, one of the best defenders for many years in the game, is providing his usual stability and leadership while having a great time playing with all of the kids on the roster.

“It’s been a lot of fun,” Merrill says. “We have 10 or 11 rookies on this team, so they bring a lot of energy. It took some time, but we’re really starting to come together. It’s a real big jump to the MLL and they had to get their confidence up. I think we’re just scratching the surface on how good a team this can be.”

Merrill would know. The Toronto native says it’s been an adjustment for him and his teammates to work in new players while at the same time, adapt to a new city.

“It was kind of tough for me being a Toronto guy (when the team moved), but it’s been a nice change overall,” Merrill says. “It’s been a good ride here so far.”

Gage agrees, especially with the talent that



has been assembled here in Hamilton.

“We have a nice blend of Canadian and American talent,” Gage believes. “We really rebuilt our midfield with players like Kevin Crowley, Jeremy Thompson and David Earl, and that really made a difference. Our younger guys keep getting better and better as they get used to the league. When you have a six-team league, the level of talent here is really high overall. And when you are as young as we are, it takes time to start winning.”

It also takes time to start drawing fans. The Nationals averaged a league low 1,174 fans to their first four home games at McMaster University.

“The good news is the facility is unbelievable — it’s the perfect size,” Gage says. “Our battle is to get people to come once because

once they see it, they enjoy it. The best players in the world are in this league playing.”

The Nationals are also getting strong performances from players like Jeremy Boltus, Cody Jamieson and Jordan Hall, with Joe Marra and Scott Rodgers dividing the time in goal, along with Brett Queener.

Hamilton was third in the league in scoring but fifth in goals against, so tightening up on the defensive side will be the order of the day for a long playoff run for the franchise that won the MLL title in 2009 while based in Toronto.

“It’s all about the playoffs in this league,” Gage says. “We’ve got a young developing team and we’ve made some additions. I guess we’ll see how good we really are in a few weeks.” ♦