

EXCELSIORS PLAN FOR INTERMEDIATE SUCCESS

HOUSE LEAGUE FEEDS REP PROGRAM; FUN AS CORE PHILOSOPHY

// By Gary Mark

It is often quoted in sports that there is a reason why they play the games. If they just gave the trophy to the favorite team going in to any contest, we would be void of witnessing some of the greatest efforts in sporting history. Of course you can add in a myriad of other famous quotes like the one about any team beating any other team on any given day. In the 2012 Intermediate "A" lacrosse division, this played out as a great example of both of these points.

The Orangeville Northmen, a team from one of the true hot beds of lacrosse sported an 18-0-1 record into the August provincial finals at the Ontario Lacrosse Festival. The Northmen won both the McCauley Memorial Tournament (in Brampton) and the Barry Burman Summer Shootout (in Orangeville). Their only hiccup from a perfect season was a 5-5 tie against the Cambridge Chiefs in July at the Conradi tournament in St. Catharines.

At the same time, the Brampton Excelsiors had a more challenging path to the finals. While the club was the defending Intermediate "A" champions, a first for this historic organization in 27 years, they had lost a number of key veteran players, and knew that winning it all in 2012 was going to be a lot tougher task.

Brampton lost in the finals of the Conradi tournament to Cambridge by a 5-3 score. Although it no doubt stung at the time, it might have been a blessing in disguise, as the well known "Conradi curse" is a time honoured tradition in Intermediate lacrosse. As the premier showcase of "A" caliber teams annually, the Conradi tournament has tripped up all but a handful of teams in the past thirty years of clubs attempting to win both the event, and a provincial gold medal.

In the games leading to the "A" provincial final, the Northmen blanked Windsor by a score of 8-0, blasted St. Catharines 11-2 and

beat Clarington 6-3. In the other round-robin pool, Brampton defeated Beaches 5-2, Six Nations 7-3, and then lost to Cambridge 5-1.

Semi-final action saw Orangeville defeat Six Nations 4-3, while Brampton handled Clarington 8-2. This would set the stage for the final. At least one team was expected to be there in the undefeated Northmen, but the Excelsiors had to prove they were up to the task of defending a championship.

It would be a close first period with Orangeville going up by two goals. That however, didn't rattle the Excelsiors and their outstanding goaltender Stephen Smalkais, an anchor throughout the season, who continued to look comfortable in net.

Brampton scored the only goal of the second period when Will VanderWeir, on a pass from Scott Silva, scored to close the gap.

The third period would start out as almost a carbon copy of the second as VanderWeir scored again (from Silva again) to



*Front Row-left to right: Stephen Smalkais, Hunter Sellars, Mark Gaudet, Grace Smalkais, Shawn McRoberts
 Second Row: Will Vanderweir, Jake Costante, Scott Silva, Brian Burke, Cody Bennett, Daniel Fitzhenry, Greame Dadson
 Third Row: Jessie McRoberts, Steve Thompson (coach), Keivan Campbell (Coach), Andrew Myers, Stephen Hutton,
 Kevin Thompson, Shawn Duncan, Austin Lorette, Steven Vanderweir, Jeff Nixon, Adam Albrecht, Denise Smalkais
 Back Row: Colin Glendenning, Travis McInnes, Jay Herd (Coach), T.J Burton, Barry Sellars (Trainer)*

tie the game at 2-2. Midway through the third period, Silva notched a go-ahead goal (from Shawn McRoberts), his third point of the game, giving Brampton its first lead of the game.

Showing why they had not encountered a loss all season, the Northmen answered off the stick of Riley Thompson (great-grandson of Canadian lacrosse Hall of Famer George "Mush" Thompson) to tie the game 3-3.

With just over five minutes to play and the game looking for a hero, the Excelsiors found one in Kevin Thompson. His game winning goal made the score 4-3 and secured Brampton as back-to-back Ontario Lacrosse Association Intermediate "A" Champions.

"After winning provincials for the second consecutive year, our goalie Stephen Smalkais, was the MVP of both games" said Brampton Head Coach Steve Thompson.

"Winning the provincials this year with nine rookies was a very pleasant surprise".

But in the end, Brampton Intermediate lacrosse is successful by design: the Brampton Minor Lacrosse Association (BMLA) Executive supports the program; the coaching staff ensures it is a fun place to play; an Intermediate house league feeds the rep team with players who aspire to move up and the Intermediate time commitment is less demanding than Junior clubs.

"Many of our players have the skill set to succeed at the next level, but due to other priorities in their lives they are unable to make a Junior commitment" says Barry Sellars, a driving force behind the Intermediate program the past four seasons.

"One of our players was a great musician, and that takes a serious time commitment, but he also loved Intermediate lacrosse because it provided the opportunity to play. There are many kids in that situation, here in Brampton, and across Ontario."

Sellars adds that a strong Intermediate

program not only secures the opportunity for participation and development, as many players do move on to Junior lacrosse, but it also serves as a recruiting ground for volunteers.

"Many of our coaches have come through this program and we have high hopes and expectations that this will continue."

"The fact that storied organizations like Brampton, Orangeville, Whitby, Six Nations and the Beaches are still able to continually field talented teams is a testament to the importance and success of Intermediate lacrosse".

St. Catharines was the last organization to capture three consecutive Intermediate "A" championships (1997-99) more than a decade ago. Can Brampton "threepeat" in 2013? Fortunately for all of us, that season is just around the corner. ♦

Gary Mark currently coaches Junior lacrosse in Ontario and is Editor of the Lacrosse- Inside the Game website at lacrosseinsidethegame.com