



Photos: Tim Prothero

# MSL: ONE OF THE GREAT SECRETS IN SPORTS?

>> BY MIKE DAVIES

**MAJOR SERIES LACROSSE (MSL)** is one of the great secrets in sports. Imagine if the National Hockey League's top players went home each summer and played for their hometown amateur teams. What kind of crowds would turn out to watch those hockey stars?

Well, that's exactly what happens each summer in lacrosse as many of the world's best professional players can be seen plying their trade in Ontario communities after starring in National Lacrosse League (NLL) centres during the winter and spring.

Cody Jamieson (Rochester/Six Nations), Shawn Evans (Calgary/Peterborough), Dan

Dawson (Rochester/Brampton), John Grant Jr. (Colorado/Peterborough), Stephen Leblanc (Toronto/Oakville), Jeff Shattler (Calgary/Six Nations), Rob Hellyer (Toronto/Oakville), Ryan Benesch (Buffalo/Kitchener-Waterloo) were among the NLL's top twelve scorers with Jamieson and Evans finishing one-two.

Most of the NLL's top goalies also play in the MSL including Matt Vinc (Rochester/Peterborough), Mike Poulin (Calgary/Kitchener-Waterloo), Anthony Cosmo (Buffalo/Brampton), Nick Rose (Toronto/Oakville), Evan Kirk (Philadelphia/Six Nations), Zach Higgins (Minnesota/Brooklin) to name a few.

Several of the greatest names in the game – John Tavares, Shawn Williams, Colin Doyle – have honed their skills in the MSL much of the past two decades.

People in Peterborough have figured out the entertainment value as the 2013 Lakers averaged 3,177 fans per game, more than 2,500 of them season ticket holders, at the Peterborough Memorial Centre.

Kodiaks general manager Steve Dietrich admits it's a frustration his organization has encountered of not drawing more fans despite the quality of the product.

"We have a minor program in Kitchener and Cambridge and Guelph and those people will go to Toronto or to Buffalo and pay a lot of money to watch a fantastic product," Dietrich said. "Yet they won't drive less distance and pay less money to watch virtually the same players play."

What should also excite fans is the increasing competitiveness of the league. For a while the Lakers and Excelsiors dominated, meeting in the league final ten consecutive years, but times are changing.

Last season, Six Nations claimed their first MSL title in seventeen years and did it by beating Brooklin in the final, their first appearance there in eleven years. There is reason to believe Kitchener-Waterloo and Oakville aren't far behind.

For several years the Chiefs looked like they'd break the Lakers and Excelsiors stranglehold on the MSL title but fell short. Not last year.

"We thought we had the right mix the last three years and looking back we didn't," said Chiefs' head coach Rich Kilgour.



"It's so hard to put together what makes a championship team. We found the mix last year."

The Chiefs could be better this year. They've returned all the key pieces and added Shattler and OLA Junior "A" star Randy Staats has graduated to senior. Kilgour says expectations will be nothing short of a repeat. This year, that would mean on home soil as the MSL champion will host the Mann Cup.

"Once you get a taste of that pie, you want another bite," said Kilgour.

The Lakers didn't take kindly to falling short of defending their 2012 Mann Cup title. For missing the MSL final for the first time in eleven years coach/GM Jamie Batley lost his job, being replaced by Minnesota head coach Joe Sullivan. Sullivan addressed a need in goal by acquiring Vinc, three-time NLL champion, in the off-season while snaring rising star Adam Jones, veteran sniper Aaron Wilson and secured the return of Andrew Suitor and Andrew Watt after both missing 2013 to injury.



"Peterborough added some nice pieces," said Kilgour. "It's going to be a battle. I think everyone in the league got better this year."

Brooklin took a major step forward last year after several years of retooling with young players.

"Last year maybe everyone was a little bit surprised Brooklin did so well but I'll tell you I wasn't," said Sullivan.

"They have a good staff there and a bunch of young players who have won Minto Cups around that Whitby area and have done phenomenal things. They've also been able to keep guys like Shawn Williams around who makes players around him better. They'll continue to get better."

Oakville GM Terry Sanderson was as aggressive as anyone in the off-season acquiring budding stars and brothers Jason and Jeremy Noble, Jordan MacIntosh and signing Hellyer while solidifying their goaltending by adding Rose. After several years at the bottom of the standings, most observers expect a major improvement in Oakville.

"They have too many good, youthful players there now, who have something to prove, to not be better," said Sullivan.

Nobody looks forward to playing the Kodiaks who may have the league's fastest team and one of the game's best goalies in Poulin. They've improved year-after-year.

Brampton has put a major focus on youth drawing rising talent from the Brampton and Orangeville systems. The league has never seen as many quality, young players.

"A lot of that has to do with the tremendous job the Junior "A" teams are doing in developing some great young players," Dietrich said, "and those young players are wanting to stay and play at home here in Ontario. That's what is going to lead to the strength and success of this league going forward."

"You look up and down everyone's roster this year and there is not an easy game on the schedule," said Kilgour.

"Oakville has stocked up on some really good young guys. Kitchener always has a young, fast team. Brampton is trying to rebuild. They had their run for ten years and now they're trying to bring up some of their young people. You go up and down the list and every team has seven, eight, nine, ten NLL calibre players. If you don't show up every night you might be on the wrong end of the scoreboard." **OLM**

*Mike Davies is the sports director of the Peterborough Examiner and has covered two decades of Major Series Lacrosse.*