

AUAA Hockey

The Fantastic Five

By Todd Petrie

The Atlantic Universities Athletic Association men's hockey league opened a new season recently as ten teams began their twenty-six game quest for the University Cup.

This season, as in any new AUAA year, changes are the name of the game -- but changes are apparent behind the bench as well as on it. Acadia head coach Tom Coolen has taken a seven month sabbatical from his job to become an assistant coach with the St. John Flames. Longtime assistant coaches Mark Hanneman and Mike Alcoe will handle the coaching duties for the Axemen. In Antigonish, the St. FX X-Men welcomed new coach Danny Flynn, who returns to his home province after a decade of coaching in the OHL. Despite all the changes, there is some stability: Jack Drover and

Darrell Young, the longest serving coaches in the league, will return again to coach Mt. Allison and Dalhousie respectively, and the league will once again stage an all-star game in February at the Halifax Metro Centre.

Here is a brief rundown of each MacAdam Division team for 1995-96, along with last year's record and standing:

UPEI Panthers (13-11-2, third place)

After two years of embarrassingly poor hockey, the 1994-95 Panthers took a major step towards recapturing the glory days of the 1980s, winning more games last year than their previous two seasons combined. Still, UPEI was only a middle class team: they were easily beaten by league leaders Dalhousie, Acadia and UNB in the regular season, and bowed out in straight games to eventual champion Moncton Blue Eagles in the playoffs. Their 143 goals against (over 5.5 per game) record was among the worst in the league and put too much pressure on their offense -- which was strong (134 goals, fifth overall).

Major changes in this year's squad begin at the top: Doug Currie and Carl Trainor have taken over from Bill MacMillan and Dave Shellington as coach and co-coach. Currie, a former player, is expected to bring new blood and a fresh enthusiasm to this year's team.

On the ice, notable departures include 5-year veteran Ron Clough, who graduated from the program last spring; Jim Sonmez, the team's second best scorer last season; Jason Denomme, who tried out with the St. John's Maple Leafs of the AHL; goaltender Kevin McDougall; defencemen Greg Webber; and Glen Craig.

The goal of this year's recruitment

program was to obtain some defensive and goaltending help as well as some bigger, tougher wingers. New recruits include former junior goaltending star David Mitchell, who played last year with Halifax; Willy Skilliter, brother of former star defenceman Kevin Skilliter; forward Todd Walker; and goaltender Craig Johnson.

Important returnees include K.J. White, John Nelson, Mike Harding, Tyler Ertel and Daryl Lavoie, all of whom provided most of last year's leadership and offense. Nelson, the league's second leading scorer last year with 56 points in 25 games, will be counted on once again to supply lots of firepower.

The Panther Booster Club is launching a "Restore the Roar" promotional campaign aimed at helping the club return to its former glory, both on the ice and at the box office. Time will tell if rookie coach Currie and his new team are equal to the task.

UNB Varsity Reds (18-4-4, first place)

UNB won its fourth straight MacAdam Division pennant last year, but will be missing a notable chunk of offensive firepower and leadership in 1995-96.

Major losses in the Reds' roster include Todd Sparks and, potentially, veterans Mike Cavanagh and Derek Cormier, who are with the Olympic program. The absence of Sparks, who led the league with 29 goals and is currently trying his luck in the AHL, will take a big bite out of UNB's offensive attack.

Coach Danny Grant hopes that size can increase his club's chances of winning a fifth straight division title. Grant's recruits include four year OHL veteran Kayle Short, who stands at 6'2", 210 pounds, and defenceman Chris Zanutto, a six foot, 204 pound former London Knight. Another recruit who should stand out is 6'5" centerman Larry McMorrin, who has major junior experience. Bolstering the Reds' offense will be former OHLer Jason Campbell, who averaged a point per game for the North Bay Centennials last year.

Eligible returnees for the Reds include Toby Burkitt, who was second to Sparks in team scoring; forwards Chris Peach, Luke Naylor and Trevor Boland; and goaltender Frank LeBlanc, who missed much of the second half of last year's season.

UNB's key to success will once again be its defense in a high-scoring league. Their new recruits are giants, but can they keep up in the fast-paced AUAA?

Moncton Blue Eagles (15-7-4, second place, won CIAU)

The Moncton camp was shocked when star forward Yves LeBlanc died in a single-car crash in early October. Team practices were canceled as officials and players made an emotional tribute to the well-liked LeBlanc. The Blue Eagles, who have since retired LeBlanc's number, have dedicated this season to their teammate.

On the ice, Moncton begins their defense of the University Cup, which they won last March. Pete Belliveau and his troops know what it takes to win, and with many of last year's key players returning, Moncton is an early favourite to win the MacAdam Division.

Moncton has lost veteran Stacy D'Allaire, but goalie Pierre Gagnon, who was once offered a pro contract, is eligible. Gagnon, however, has opted not to play the first half of the season, leaving the goaltending in the hands of veteran Frantz Bergevin. Also returning are team leading scorer Jean Imbeau, Raymond Delarosbil, Patrick Caron, Dominic Rheume and Ricky and Peter Jacob.

Moncton's defense is shaky at best, but their 167-goal offensive record (second in the league) more than compensates. Rookie Shane Doiron looked sharp in the pre-season and Moncton, who sported a 3-0 exhibition record, seems more than ready to defend its title.

St. Thomas Tommies (11-12-3, fourth place)

After UPEI, Al MacAdam's team was probably the most improved in the league last season. They upset division leader and cross-town rivals UNB before losing to Moncton and are no doubt prepared to build on this success.

MacAdam has concentrated on recruiting scoring power during the off season--STU had one of the league's worst offensive records, with no one in the top ten. Unfortunately, this year's rookies do not appear to offer any immediate solutions.

MacAdam will also feel the loss of veterans Mark Rupnow, Vojtech Kucera, and steady defenceman Garth Joy, who completed their five years of AUAA eligibility last season.

Fortunately for the Tommies, goaltender Johnny Lorenzo is eligible to return. Lorenzo, with almost 1500 minutes played last year, was the workhorse of the league and still managed to sport a superb 3.55 GAA.

Mt. Allison Mounties (2-22-2, last place)

The Mounties won only twice last year, and with the departure of their two leading scorers (Andy Meth and Mike Mullaly), one might assume the Mounties are destined to inhabit the MacAdam Division basement for the sixth straight year.

Coach Jack Drover, who has expanded his efforts to recruit new talent and rejuvenate the hockey program, believes his squad should be much improved this season thanks to some new faces in the lineup and a large group of sophomores who now have a year of AUAA experience under their belts.

Returnees that Drover is counting on include Chris Gilmour, Mike Arthur and Heath Stirling. Drover also expects -- and needs -- veterans Andy Meth and Greg Foulidis to come forward and replace the leadership and scoring power of Meth and Mullaly.

Also returning are goalies Trent Mann and Aaron Beals, whose average of almost seven goals per game wasn't that bad since they were playing behind a defense that allowed as many as 70 shots per game.

New faces include Brian Turner, Chris Moores, Don Clipperton and Brian Harriman.

The improved Mounties have a young team (only two senior players are on the roster), but the team's 2-0 record in the pre-season indicates that Drover's patience with young players and his recent excursion to Ontario in search of new talent may be paying off, however, fourth place in the MacAdam Division is still a big jump forward. Mt. Allison may be keeping up with the other teams, but whether or not they are gaining any ground remains to be seen.

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