

Junior B Northmen retain Founder's Cup for Orangeville

By Mike Pickford

The Orangeville Jr. B Northmen saved their best lacrosse for just the right time this year, winning six straight at the recent Founders Cup tournament in Saskatchewan to bring home a remarkable second successive national championship.

After what was described at the time as an 'almost euphoric' feeling in claiming the Founders Cup on home turf a little more than 12 months ago, the boys traveled west hoping to do it all again. In typical Northmen fashion, they did not disappoint.

It was definitely shades of a bygone era at the Gordie Howe Kinsmen Arena in Saskatoon as the Northmen completely blew their competition away, putting up 77 goals against the absolute best junior B outfits the country has to offer. Reflecting on the big win upon his return home to Orangeville, Northmen Head Coach Bruce Codd admitted it was a 'special feeling' repeating as Founders Cup champions.

'This is just a phenomenal achievement,' Codd said. 'Last year was pretty cool to do it at home in front of all of our fans, but the big thing about last year was that we knew no matter what, that we'd be in the tournament right from day one because we were the host team. This year, we had to scrape and claw throughout the whole year to punch our ticket and be able to go back and defend our trophy.'

Not that you would know it looking at the team's results. They posted a 17-3 regular season record, but the Northmen didn't have the greatest of starts to the season, according to Codd. While they managed to string together a good run of victories in May, it wasn't until the playoffs that the Northmen really found their stride. Saving their best for last, Codd believes his team was at its absolute best in Saskatoon.

The team kicked off its second straight nationals appearance with an emphatic 12-6 victory over the Red Deer Rampage Aug. 15. They followed that up with a hard fought 12-8 victory over the Manitoba Blizzard the next day.

Heading into the third day, the Northmen sat atop the standings alongside their American counterparts the Seneca WarChiefs with each team recording two wins from two. What many believed would be one of the most competitive match ups in the entire tournament turned into a one-way blowout as the Northmen put the WarChiefs to the sword with a 9-1 finish.

'That game against Seneca was interesting because we were both 2-0 and we both looked really impressive I felt across our first two games,' Codd said. 'Seneca decided to take the approach to rest some of their guys for that game and it really ended up hurting them. They lost to us convincingly and then lost to Red Deer the next day, which essentially put them out.'

With momentum on their side, the Northmen cruised to victories over the Saskatchewan SWAT and Coquitlam Adanacs in games four and five, putting up 26 goals in the process. The tournament's finale was set for Aug. 20 and a rematch with the Red Deer Rampage beckoned. While overconfidence could have been a factor, considering the relative ease in which the Northmen dispatched of the Rampage in the competition's opening game, there was absolutely no doubting the final result half way through the game.

'I think the championship game against the Rampage might have been our best game all year, it was near perfection,' Codd said. 'We were good in almost all aspects of the game. Our defence was solid, we didn't give up a whole lot in good quality looks and we were very effective ourselves in the transition. Our power play went three for four, we were good when playing a man short . . . You factor in all of those things and it makes for a pretty dominant game.'

The final result was 18-7 in favour of the Northmen.

While the coach was keen to recognize the efforts of his entire 23-man squad, he did reserve special praise for three individuals he thought really stepped up on the grandest stage in junior B lacrosse.

'Kyle Waters was great for us in that final game,' the coach said. 'He scored four goals, three of them back-to-back-to-back in that second period to really seal the game for us. Nick Farrus is another. Nick has been great for us all year long, he has this knack of finding big goals when we need them and he was there for us once again in Saskatoon. He led the entire tournament in scoring with 24 goals. It was a big performance from him.'

Despite the stellar performances of Waters and Farrus, it was very much business as usual when tournament organizers had to determine which member of the Northmen squad would have the distinction of becoming the 2017 Founders Cup MVP. The choice, according to Codd, was more than likely unanimous.

'Mike Sutton was named MVP and rightfully so,' he observed. 'He had so many unbelievable performances. Quite often you'll see that level of play out of your 21-year-olds, the guys in their last year who step it up because they know it's their last kick of the can so to speak. He stepped it up and then some - he was good in every single game and scored some really nice goals to help us on our way.'

Sutton finished the tournament with 12 goals and 35 assists across six games, good enough for 47 points and the Founders Cup

scoring leader title. He finished one point ahead of his fellow sniper Nick Farrus.

And so with another one in the bag, the challenge now for the junior B Northmen coaching staff will be putting together a team capable of challenging for an unprecedented 'three-peat.' With six senior players graduating from the team this year, that will be no mean feat for Codd and the rest of his staff.

'That's the thing about junior lacrosse,' he observed. 'You have to be mindful about the fact that you only have these guys for a certain period of time . . . I guess for right now, we'll celebrate the fact that we are two-time champs, but we know we can't rest on our laurels. There will be big changes next season and we're going to have to start working soon to plug the gaps we're going to have on our roster.'

Most of those, Codd said, will likely come from the 'phenomenal' minor system in place in Orangeville. Long considered one of Canada's bedrock communities for lacrosse, Codd is hoping the success of the town's junior B outfit will inspire local kids to pick up their sticks and get involved in the country's national sport.

'This is a big deal for Orangeville,' he said. 'It gives local kids something to aspire to. I know when I was younger and growing up, we always looked up to the Northmen teams that had success. I grew up right around the time the junior B team first recorded back to back championships in 1989 and 1990 and it was huge. The interest that generated for the sport was incredible.'

'I just hope we're able to continue the tradition and inspire today's generation, because without that steady flow of skilled players coming through our system, there wouldn't be success for the Northmen organization,' he concluded. 'For us, it's all about keeping up the tradition and culture of winning in our town.'