Tues. 12/22/09

The Hoggers' Improbable Feat

When the final buzzer of Sunday morning's seventh-place game at the Lawrenceville Christmas Tournament sounded, the Northfield-Mt. Hermon players streamed off the bench and made a beeline for the crease to congratulate their goalie for the win.

Only problem was, no goalie was there. The reason: NMH had played the entire game - their second in a row -- without a goalie. That's right, no goalie at all. Not even a shooter tutor.

Several players could be seen reaching out and air-patting the spot where their goalie would have stood.

Thus, with a 12-4 win over Lawrenceville, a game in which NMH outshot their hosts 66-4, the Hoggers' improbable run to a seventh-place finish at the tournament came to an end.

The story starts earlier, though, back on Dec. 9, when NMH's #1 goalie, Branden Komm, pulled a hamstring muscle in a 3-2 loss to Deerfield. He was put on the shelf, and told to rest up until the Cushing Tournament, which begins Jan. 1st. Next, NMH's #3 goalie, Jon Wells, suffered a concussion in the last week of practice before exams.

The upshot: NMH headed to New Jersey on Friday with just one healthy goalie, sophomore Nik Nunges, and hoped for the best.

However, in their first game of the tournament, on Saturday morning vs. Belmont Hill, Nunges took a couple of hits, hard enough that penalties were called on the Belmont Hill players. Nunges finished the game, a 4-2 loss.

That afternoon, during warm-ups for NMH's second tilt of the day, versus a young, skilled Nichols team, Nunges came to coach Tom Pratt and reported that he was suffering from a headache and blurred vision. The NMH trainer took a look and reported to Pratt that Nunges had a concussion and would not be able to play.

Komm volunteered to go in the net. Pratt, however, envisioned a scenario in which the whole season could go down in ashes, and told Komm no.

The game was minutes away - and NMH had no one to put in the net. "My first thought" said Pratt, "was can I even play a whole game without a goalie?"

He could, and he did. However, Pratt, a defenseman at Bowling Green in the mid-'80s, had no time to prepare.

"I created three units of six, with the sixth player being taken off the fourth line," he said.

Basically, Pratt was playing a 4-2.

On the opponent's bench, Nichols coach Jamie Printz, once he realized what was transpiring, realized he too would have to come up with a strategy. "But we got fortunate," he said, "and got out to an early lead. I think we were up 3-0 before they got their first goal."

Nichols scored a bunch of goals from their end, gaining control of the puck and winging it the length of the ice.

"It was weird," Printz said. "We'd score and we were a bunch of jerks for scoring into an empty net. We couldn't get any satisfaction from scoring goals. But when they scored it was a big momentum boost for them!"

Nichols built leads of 3-0, 4-1, and 6-2. "I told my guys it would be hard, and that Northfield would score goals," Printz said. "We just had to score more."

"In the second period, NMH began to swing the puck back to the point and then four guys would crash the net. They scored a lot that way. There were constant second and third opportunities. And it wore down our goalie.

"We were only up 10-8 after two periods, but they didn't score again after that. We became more patient. We got it out into the neutral zone and tried to force turnovers. And we packed it down low and made it hard to get through.

"But it was an amazing thing to be a part of. You'd think it would be a throwaway game, but it was very difficult to play against. It was so hard to get to a loose puck and when you did get there, two guys were on you and you couldn't make a play."

Printz pointed out that his team was basically killing a 45-minute power play. "For one and a half or two minutes that's one thing, but for 45 minutes it's something else entirely. You can't make plays so your guys get frustrated just banging it out of the zone for 45 minutes. Plus the goalie just doesn't get a break. He's in a crouch for 45 minutes. The puck just never comes out of the zone for any sustained time. That will wear you down fast."

"On top of that, NMH was quick, determined, and desperate. With no goalie, they were playing without a safety net. It was very interesting to watch and very hard to play against."

At the final buzzer Nichols had a 14-8 win, but it was hard-earned: they'd been outshot 53-14.

Saturday night, Pratt had a lot to think about before retiring. The next morning's game was an early one, at 8:00 am - the so-called toilet bowl - and he had to come up with a better mousetrap.

First, a couple kids came to him, volunteering to go into the net. "After the Nichols game," Pratt said, "I felt we had a better chance skating 6-on-5 than just throwing someone in net. Plus I'd feel terrible if one of my guys were to injure himself doing something he wasn't trained to do."

"When I say I felt we had a better chance, I also really felt that we needed to put up a football score," Pratt said. "I felt we would need 15 goals to win.

"While the kids gave a tremendous effort in the Nichols game, I felt we needed to give that same effort vs. Lawrenceville, but in a more organized manner. What we did was simplify the role of the sixth skater. Against Nichols, we had put him in a position where he had to do too much skating.

"Also in the Nichols game, we allowed their guys an extra four or five seconds to gain control of the puck and then flip it down to our end. So against Lawrenceville, we kept that fourth forward high in the offensive zone. We also ran a really aggressive two-man forecheck with the third forward a little lower than normal."

NMH scored 13 seconds into the game against Lawrenceville and never trailed. Indeed, the Hoggers were up 2-0 before Lawrenceville even got the puck out of their own end. And when Lawrenceville did get it up into the neutral zone, NMH just jumped all over them.

Meanwhile, Printz, whose Nichols team was playing in the next game, watched with interest.

"They dropped the fourth forward back to the high slot so they could defend better," he said. "And it certainly helped that they scored right off the bat. You could see in the second that the Lawrenceville goalie was wearing down. He was getting peppered."

By period, the shots on goal were 24-1, 23-2, and 19-1.

In the third period, Printz observed, the Lawrenceville goalie was getting seriously worn down. "After NMH got their second goal in the third period (making it 9-3), Lawrenceville knew they weren't going to be able to come back. You could see it. It looked like they were accepting defeat."

"I tip my hat to Northfield," Printz said. "They competed and did what they had to do. They were dogs on the puck, just relentless. It was amazing. They got to everything. It will be interesting to see how it translates to the rest of their season. It was a tough situation for those kids. They could have gone south on that, but instead they made it a positive. It was impressive to watch."

A Div. I college recruiter who watched both of NMH's goalie-less games said that it took the NMH kids a little while to figure out how to play 6-on-5. "But then they made it a game. It was fun to watch. You had to root for them because they kept coming back. Going into the third period against Nichols it was a close game. The kids never packed it in. There was no quit in them. That's what stood out for me. They would get scored on from the red line and then on the next faceoff they'd be trying to figure out how to get it back."

"It was fun to watch, and very entertaining. I saw something I'll never see again. I should also point out that coach Pratt wasn't discouraged after the Nichols game -- and that just had to rub off on his players."

"As for the Lawrenceville game, in those 8:00 am games before Christmas vacation a lot of times kids are just going through the motion. But suddenly you're in the last-place game without a goalie -- and they were trying to win it like they were playing in the first place game! Hats off to them. It was really neat. Tom Pratt did a good job with his group. And those kids will be talking about that game for the rest of their lives."