

Preview stories for a number of the sports offered at the 30th annual Empire State Games will appear in next week's edition of The Bee. Coverage of the Games, which are being held in the Hudson Valley region, will run in the August 1 edition of the paper. Be sure to follow the progress of the athletes representing Amherst over the next two issues of the paper.

## ESG – Scholastic men's ice hockey

# Western not a stranger as the favorite

by PATRICK J. NAGY  
Reporter

When it comes to the Empire State Games, it's usually a given that the Western region will be playing for a gold medal in scholastic men's ice hockey. This year should be no different.

Western men's hockey, winners of the last seven gold medals and 19 gold medals since it became an ESG sport in 1982, should be the favorite heading into this year's Games in Westchester County.

Western players and coaches know teams from other regions will have their sights set on knocking them off, but they'll be ready.

"It's easier to have a bull's-eye on us than to be an underdog," said Western coach Dave Smith, an East Amherst resident. "It's a good position to be in because it means you have to be on your game all of the time."

"There is a certain amount of pressure, but you don't think about it when you're playing," added Kenmore's Peter Creighton. "You just want to go out and do your job and have fun while you're doing it."

The success of Western hockey over the years stems from great players. Future National Hockey League stars Kevyn Adams and Todd Marchant, who won Stanley Cups with the Carolina Hurricanes and Anaheim Ducks, respectively, once skated for Western, as did the No. 1 pick of the 2007 NHL draft, Patrick Kane, who had five goals and three assists in last year's ESGs.

"You don't get this opportunity

a lot, so it's exciting when you do," said Creighton, a soon-to-be senior at Canisius High School. "You see kids like Pat Kane who have done this, so it's an honor to play."

"It's a big accomplishment," added Williamsville's Branden Komm, one of Western's two goalies. "I'm trying to fill some big shoes."

Western returns only three players - West Seneca's Brandon Broad and Rochester's Ryan Grimshaw, both defensemen, and Niagara Falls' Kevin Ogiba - but the teammates know each other from playing travel hockey as teammates or opponents.

"Everyone knows each other," said Creighton.

Most of the Western roster also knows how to win.

Both Western goalies, Komm and Mohny, helped Williamsville North and Sweet Home to the Section VI Western New York Varsity Hockey Federation small and large school regular season titles, respectively. (Sweet Home lost in the New York State Division II regional; North fell in the Division I final).

Komm had a 1.83 goals against average, 94 percent save percentage and a 17-4-3 record. Komm finished with a 14-4-3 record, 1.98 goals against average and a .931 save percentage.

Lancaster residents Joe Rogalski (defense) and Brian Inman (forward) helped the Lancaster Redskins qualify for the state tournament as the second large school out of the WNY Hockey Federation.

Williamsville's Cole Schneider

(18 goals, 22 assists) was a key forward in St. Joe's winning the Western New York Varsity Hockey Federation and New York State Catholic High School Athletic Association titles. He was MVP of the NYS Catholic title game.

Ogiba and Sanborn's Nicholas Melligan were forwards on Niagara-Wheatfield's WNY Club large school crown.

Smith doesn't know yet what the starting lineups will look like, but he has paired Broad (6 foot, 205 pounds) with Rogalski (6-foot-1, 185 pounds) at defense and Creighton, West Seneca's Matt Owczarczak and Derby's Patrick Sullivan on a forward line, in practice.

Owczarczak played for West Seneca West in the Southtowns Club Hockey League. Sullivan, along with Kevin Ryan of Eden, played for St. Francis in the Midwest Prep Hockey League.

Other members of the team are West Seneca's Kevin English (Buffalo Junior Sabres), Buffalo's Sam Alfrieri (Shattuck-St. Mary's School in Fairbault, Minn.) and Charlie Mullan (Nichols), Grand Island's Benjamin Certo (Nichols), Spencerport's Ryan Edwards (Aquinas), and Fairport's Jonathan Sucece and Jon Paul Witkop.

"We have a good group of kids," said Smith. "We have a lot of good overall team speed and a real mobile and active defense."

"It's fun to work with the kids and see them improve," he added. "So I'm excited for the games to begin to watch how they do."

Smith is the head men's hockey coach at Canisius College and will be assisted at the ESGs by Williamsville's Nick Carriere (Buffalo State College hockey coach), Terry Miller and Mike Mondoux (Kenmore West assistant).



Amherst's Derek Mohny will share goaltending duties with Williamsville's Branden Komm for the Western men's scholastic hockey team at the Empire State Games. Western has won gold the last seven years.

Photo by Joe Eberle

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Western opens against Adirondack at 4:30 p.m., Thursday, July 26 at The Ice Hutch at Mount Vernon. The players want to bring back nothing but gold.

"We're going there expecting to win," said Komm.

"We'd like to keep the streak going," added Rogalski, who at 15 is one of the younger players on the roster.

"It's my last year, so I don't want

to be that team that goes and doesn't win the gold and ruin the streak," stated Broad. "If we work harder than everybody, we should win it."

Smith agrees with his players. "I think it would be a disappointment for everyone if we don't get gold," he said. "We'll do everything we can to win."

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# Competition continues to evolve after 30 years

by MATT KRUEGER  
Reporter

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, the Empire State Games should be blushing like a June bride.

Since the Games' inception in 1978, 36 other states have followed suit by creating their own form of mini Olympics.

As the other states in the union emulate New Yorkers, the organizers of the Empire State Games get to feel rather proud of the creation they have worked to grow and preserve for the past three decades.

"I think it's flattering," Empire State Games director Fred Smith said. "It's a testament to New York's commitment to sports and recreation."

But a trip to some other competitions would show worlds of difference. The California State Games feature junior lifeguarding, surfing and roller skating.

The Iowa Games have adventure race, skateboarding and water skiing. The Sunflower State Games in Kansas showcase disc golf, flag football and ultimate Frisbee. Minnesota has something called a basketball hot shot. The Big Sky Games in Montana have Brazilian Ju Jitsu. And many states feature sports not seen in the Empire State Games like baton twirling, BMX biking, dodgeball, figure skating, handball, kick ball, rock climbing, table tennis and wiffle ball.

The Empire State Games have continued to grow in the past 30 years and will host more than 6,000 athletes from across the state next week. But it leaves the question of how the games can continue to increase its popularity.

"I think we'll continue to grow, but it's a controlled growth," Smith said. "We're pretty maxed out in some venues as far as beds and rooms for the athletes. Any



growth now will probably be at the cost of something else."

There have been talks among Smith and the regional directors about adding new competitions to the Empire State Games. After all, if the Show Me State Games in Missouri can hold 40 events, including cross country, darts, dressage and flag football, why can't New York update its competition list?

"We might replace some sports

down the line," Smith said. "We'll take a look at new sports that generate a lot of interest. We have no plans to make any sweeping changes, but you could see something in the future."

Sports have changed over the years. Open baseball, open field hockey, handball and water polo have been discontinued at the Games, while men's and women's rugby transferred from open to masters in 2004. Fencing and

shooting were cancelled for the 2003 ESGs in Buffalo, but brought back for the 2004 Games in Binghamton.

Beyond the growth aspect though, Smith said his focus for the coming years is to keep some perspective on the competition. He wants to make sure nobody is excluded.

"I think sometimes we fall victim to our own success," he said.

"The games have been perceived as the state's best athletes. That's good, but we don't want to discourage athletes from trying out. I've heard that before, that someone didn't want to try out because he wasn't all-state in high school. We encourage all people to try out and give it a shot. We used to have a poster here in the office that read 'On any given day, anyone can win.' We still believe that."

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