

Bee Group Newspapers will be sending two reporters and a photographer to Binghamton this week to cover the local athletes competing in the 31st annual Empire State Games, with stories and photos slated to appear in the July 30 and 31st editions of the papers. Be sure to follow your favorite athletes' endeavors in next week's edition.

ESG — Girl's Ice Hockey

New faces hoping to help vets reclaim golden status

by JASON NADOLINSKI
Reporter

The Western Region's scholastic girl's hockey team has been able to maintain a high level of success over the last few seasons because, contrary to what you'd expect, its players have been so young and so talented that there hasn't been too much roster turnover.

Those days came to an end last summer in Westchester County — when Western claimed bronze to maintain its string of medaling since the sport began being offered in 1999 — when a good number of Western's players reached the age when they'd no longer be eligible to compete in the scholastic division. But, don't expect Western to roll over and play dead this week in Binghamton.

There's plenty of veteran savvy to go along with new blood eager to keep Western's winning tradition alive.

"If we take care of the little things and come ready to play every game, I feel confident we should do well and finish in the

top three," Western coach Kristin Steele said. "For us to get the gold, the girls have got to come together and play with an identity. They've got to be on it every game we play. You only get one shot, so we've got to set the tone right from game one."

Eight of the 20 girls on this year's team played in last summer's Games. One of the team's four returning forwards is Rochester's Jillian Cardella, who

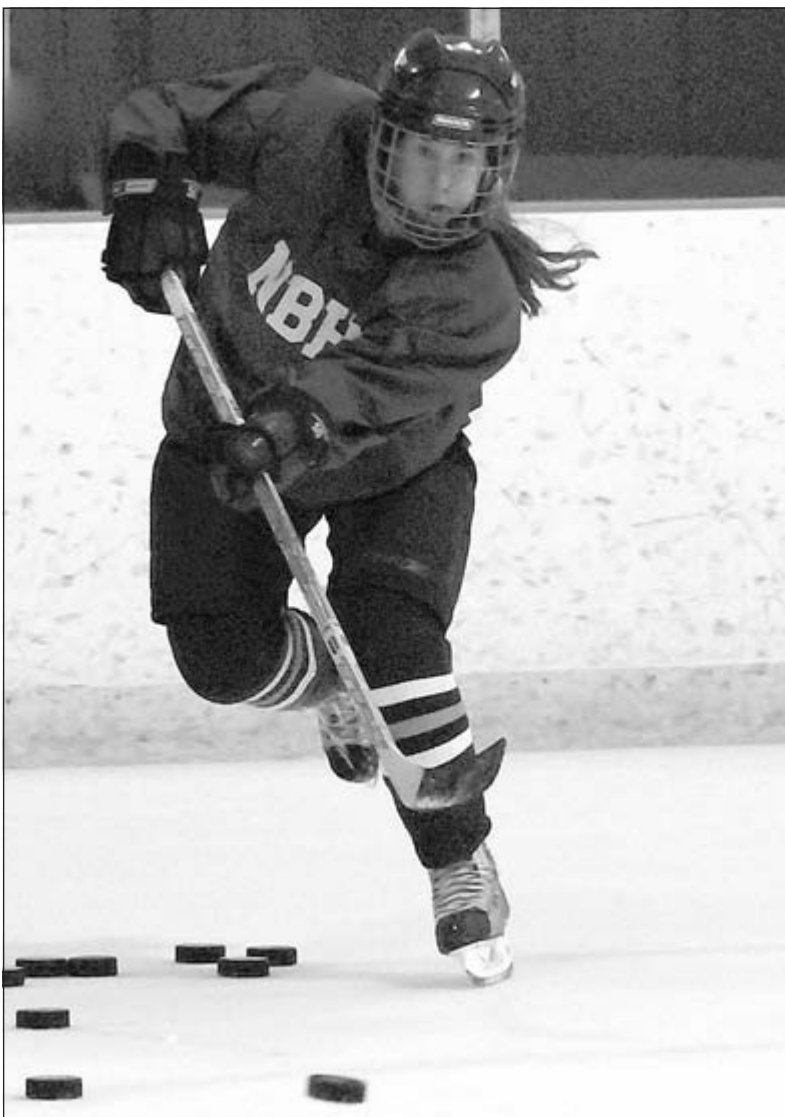
“If we take care of the little things and come ready to play every game, I feel confident we should do well and finish in the top three.”

— Western coach Kristin Steele, Williamsville resident

led Western with seven goals and three assists in 2007. Another returning forward, East Amherst resident Kelsey Welch (three goals, two assists in 2007), helped Nichols win the CISAA League and place third in the NAPHA League standings with a 24-3-3 record

last winter.

The Buffalo-area's only other returning players from last year's squad are defenseman Jacque Greco, a Clarence resident and member of Nichols' team, and goalie Kim Sass, an East Amherst resident. Greco had two assists last year, while Sass made 60 saves on the 68 shots she faced in



East Amherst resident Hannah Epstein fires a puck across the ice during the Empire State Games Western Region's girls hockey team practice at the Amherst Pepsi Center Saturday morning. Photo by Jason Nadolinski. Purchase color photos at www.BeeNews.com

two complete-game losses. She also played half a game in one of Western's wins, making seven saves.

"We definitely have one of the top goalies returning in Kim, and we've got some very savvy veteran players in Jacque and (Webster's) Kristina Moss on defense," Steele said. "Up front, Kelsey and Jillian are definitely some of the stronger players in New York."

Among the newcomers looking to step in and contribute are fellow Nichols players Hannah Epstein (East Amherst), Marissa Faso (Clarence Center), Paige Matecki (Elma) and Heather Rinow (Lancaster), all of whom are forwards. Steele is hoping for big things from this group once they get acclimated to each other.

"I think people are still getting to know each other a little bit so they're a little quiet yet, but I expect that to change," Steele said. "Our defense is big with some really good size and reach, and we've got a ton of speed up front, which should take us pretty far. We're going to definitely want to jump on the loose pucks to put teams away."

"I'm just very excited to have made the team," Rinow said. "I didn't really have and big summer plans and I wanted to get in shape for the upcoming season, so now I have something to do for a couple of weeks. It's been about the same as playing varsity at

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ESG — Men's Hockey

Western seeks ninth consecutive gold medal

by PATRICK J. NAGY
Reporter

If there's any Western Region squad going into the Empire State Games with high expectations, it's the men's scholastic ice hockey team.

Since scholastic men's ice hockey was offered as an ESG sport, Western has tasted gold in 20 of the 26 years. They've also won gold the past eight years,

tying them for the fourth-longest win streak in Western history.

The Western coaches and players know how crucial it is to keep the gold medal streak alive.

"The streak is important," said Western scholastic men's ice hockey coach Nick Carriere, a Williamsville resident and head coach for the Buffalo State College men's team. "There are some bragging rights for the Western New York region. We have to just

worry about ourselves. As long as we do that, I feel pretty confident with the outcome."

"Losing is bound to happen sooner or later," said Williamsville's Cole Schneider. "You just don't want it to happen to you."

Top to bottom, Western is loaded with talent. The only speed bump Carriere has come across has been getting every player at practice because they have other hockey commitments. Last Thursday was the first time the team practiced together as a whole unit.

"You're dealing with upper echelon kids who go to USA Hockey camps and things of that nature so it's been frustrating in that regard," said Carriere. "We're aware that we have good hockey players and combining that with an unbelievable level of effort, hockey knowledge and skills, it's your Detroit Red Wings recipe (for success)."

Returning from last year's Western team are West Seneca's Matt Owczarczak, Schneider and Fairport's Jonathan Sucece at forward, Grand Island's Benjamin Certo on defense, and Williamsville's Branden Komm in goal.



Nick Fronczak, far left, and goalie Branden Komm are members of the Western Region men's scholastic hockey team for the Empire State Games. Komm is penciled in as Western's No. 1 goalie. Fronczak and Komm played high school hockey for Williamsville North last year.

File photo



Williamsville's Nick Angelo, left, makes his Empire State Games' debut with the Western Region men's scholastic hockey team.

File photo

Despite graduating this past June from St. Joseph's Collegiate Institute, Schneider made the Western roster because he does not turn 18 until October.

A new ESG rule this year states that athletes who are under 18 can still participate on a scholastic team, even if you graduated

from high school.

"I didn't think I could play on Western again but I was told about it in the beginning of July," said Schneider. "It's pretty nice to be back. I didn't expect it. I hope to have the same fun again this year."

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