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Mauhs, Comfort, Mongillo look to guide area teams to glory

Jim Fuller , Register Staff

"Who will be left?"

Those four simple words, that one inquiry, seemed to be a fitting epitaph ready to be etched on the Connecticut high school hockey tombstone.

Even before the 2004-05 season ended with Fairfield Prep celebrating its second straight Division I state title on a brisk March day at Yale's Ingalls Rink, the whispers of the impending wholesale departures could be heard from Fairfield to Farmington, from West Haven to Avon.

Yes, these tasty rumors had more than a little bit of bite to them. The lure of prep school was just too much for the best and brightest stars in the Nutmeg State to ignore.

The names of the departing stars read like a who's who of Connecticut high school hockey.

Leading the list was Fairfield Prep's Mark Arcobello, the 2005 Register State Most Valuable Player, who left for Salisbury. Notre Dame-West Haven All-Stater Randy Wolcott ended up at Avon Old Farms as did Farmington's Nick Bonino, fresh off scoring a state single-season record 68 goals. North Branford's slick center Rick Longobardi also made his way to play for the Winged Beavers. West Haven offensive dynamo Joe Pereira found a new home at South Kent. With opening night of the new high school hockey season upon us, the question just has to be asked one more time. "Who will be left?"

Still waiting for an answer?

Try this trio. Ken Comfort, Karl Mauhs and Mike Morgillo.

On the surface, the three senior forwards and top returning scorers for the West Haven, Notre Dame-West Haven and Hamden programs would seem to have little in common other than the gift for of wreaking havoc with a pair of skates and a hockey stick and the "C" embroidered into their jerseys as a captain for three of the state's most tradition-steeped sports programs.

The three rival players are linked by their quest for the one thing they desire the most, that elusive state title.

Pretty much from the time that the news hit that the incomparable Arcobello would not be back at Prep for his senior year, the race for the Division I title became a lot more wide open.

Before they embarked on their senior seasons, Comfort, Mauhs and Morgillo made it clear that their final year would be measured by the championship hardware that has eluded them thus far.

SPREADING HIS WINGS

A year ago, Comfort was known as the "other" forward on West Haven's scintillating first line.

Playing alongside All-Stater Pereira and the underrated Eric Blewett, Comfort was asked to provide the grit while Pereria and Blewett delivered the glamour. If Comfort wasn't digging the puck out of the corners, he was stationed within an inch of two from the opposing goalie, running interference for Pereira and Blewett.

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Those days are over. At the West Haven Hockey Jamboree, Comfort displayed aspects to his game that had only surfaced in West Haven practices. Whether he was gliding through the neutral zone or setting up shop behind the net, Comfort was proving he was far from just being the third wheel.

After scoring most of his 18 goals as a junior off Pereira and Blewett rebounds or setups, Comfort will be asked to be that do-everything forward on a regular basis.

Comfort, who had 16 goals and 14 assists as a junior, is ready for the added responsibility.

"I think we should be able to work together well," said Comfort, who will begin the season playing on a line with Matt D'Amato and freshman Nick Centore. "We'll create some scoring chances and put some pucks in the net.

"It hurt a little bit losing Pereira and (defenseman Peter) BonTempo, who went off to prep school. But there is nothing we can do about that. We just to rebuild and regroup like we do every year and come back strong."

Even with Pereira, Blewett and BonTempo, there was plenty of pain in the West Haven program. After a series of heartbreaking losses, West Haven nearly missed the Division I state tournament. This season, Comfort is eager to lead West Haven back to its perch as one of the top programs in the state.

"A lot of people are counting us out, but it is not going to happen. As a leader, I am not going to let it happen," Comfort said. "I am going to do what I have to do to make sure we have a winning team."

COMING OUT OF HIS SHELL

Scoring goals has always come easily for Mauhs.

Gifted with perhaps the softest set of goal-scoring hands of any current Connecticut high school player, Mauhs can weave his magic around the net.

But with so many players and leaders gone from a Notre Dame team that reached the Division I state final for the second straight year, Mauhs has been thrust into a leadership role on the ice and off.

"I had to change a little bit, be a little more vocal," Mauhs said. "I'm being a leader on the ice because they are going to follow what I do."

Mauhs and the other seniors took their expanded roles rather seriously. Occasionally having to play the role of bad guy to make sure the younger players were doing their part in the offseason training program, Mauhs did more than just be named a team captain. He acted like one.

"We did off-ice (training), and we ran that with the other seniors," Mauhs said. "Hopefully, that will help out."

A year ago, the Green Knights got off to a slow start offensively. ND coach Bill Gerosa decided to shake up his lines. When Mauhs was paired with slick playmaking center Daniel Mauriello, the Green Knights' offense began to sizzle.

Mauriello has moved on to play with the Junior Wolf Pack of the Atlantic Junior Hockey League. Now Mauhs plays with classmates Kyle Patnaude and Tom Glynn.

"Last year, we had a great passing line," Mauhs said. "We think we can do that again.

We have a lot of lot of young kids. They have to step up. They aren't used to playing in front of big crowds."

Mauhs could easily have joined the likes of Arcobello, Pereira, Bonino and Longobardi and headed to prep school. It wasn't a tough choice.

"No, this is where I want to be," Mauhs said.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

It all seemed so easy.

Morgillo took to the ice as a promising freshman forward and had the best seat in the house as Hamden reached the 2003 Division I state final.

Not even a 3-2 loss in that game could take the glimmer off that special season. Certainly, there would be more championship appearances to come.

Well ...

The following season, Hamden lost to Notre Dame-West Haven in the qualifying round. Then last year there was little solace in the fact that Fairfield Prep's toughest test en route to its second straight Division I title was a 2-1 win over a scrappy Hamden team in the tournament quarterfinals.

Suddenly, there is one last run in store for Morgillo and the rest of the Hamden seniors.

"Winning the state championship is pretty much (the goal)," said Morgillo, who had 16 goals and eight assists as a junior. "I came here my freshman year and we came close, and this is the year that we can pick it up and, hopefully, go for the gold.

"I think we have a good shot of going far this year. We have three good goalies, four solid lines and some good rookies."

Playing in a system where the emphasis is placed on defense, defense, defense, and then, just for kicks, a little defense, Morgillo learned how to do things the Hamden way.

On a team struggling to find a scorer, Morgillo scored 16 goals while emerging into one of the top two-way forwards in the Southern Connecticut Conference and the state.

Morgillo is not about to shirk his defensive responsibilities, but he is eager to add a little more punch to the Hamden attack.

"We have to pick it up in the scoring (department)," Morgillo said. "We have some finishers."

There are none better than Morgillo. Hamden coach Bill Verneris called Morgillo "the best forward in the area" on his preseason prospectus.

If Morgillo lives up to his coach's lofty praise, it will be because of his ferocious work ethic.

"I didn't know much as a freshman," Morgillo said. "I was still learning the ropes. I have been working on my speed, finding the holes and scoring. We did a lot of running, lot of hand motions, agility (drills), the whole nine yards."

Morgillo watched from afar as some of his SCC rivals headed off to prep school. Not only did Arcobello, Pereira, Wolcott and BonTempo leave, but Lyman Hall-Wallingford lost sophomore forward Jon Schanke and defenseman Lee Moffie, Notre Dame lost junior defenseman Bill Silengo, and Fairfield Prep defenseman Matt Helderman also went the prep school route.

"It's amazing how many guys go to prep school," Morgillo said. "But you still have (stars) in high school hockey, and we have to prove it."

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