

# School hockey: Young Spartans on the rise

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PHOTOGRAPHER: PETER BARBER

Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake goalie Austin Clark, keeps his eye on the puck with teammate Ian Speck, left, as LaSalle's Christopher Hunt tries to get a shot off in the first period at Hudson Valley Community College Wednesday.



TROY — Better numbers off the ice have resulted in better on-ice results this season for the Burnt Hills/Ballston Spa hockey team.

The Spartans took a 4-2 win at LaSalle on Wednesday night, their sixth straight Capital District High School Hockey League victory and their seventh in eight games overall.

“The kids are all committed to the program,” said head coach Jim Buffoline, whose team is 6-2-0 in league play and 7-4-1 overall. “This is the second year in a row that the number of kids out for the team has gone up. And we have a seventh- and eighth-grade team that are all very skilled players.”

The added depth has shown up in individual stats, as well.

“The biggest difference this year is we’re able to roll three lines out there every game,” Buffoline said. “We’re not dependent on any one line. Last year, our top line accounted for the vast majority of our goals.”

The top line made its presence felt in the first period when Nick Van Liew, one of just five seniors on the roster, scored a pair of goals 2:20 apart. Linemate Ian Speck, who played point on the power play, assisted on the first goal. Trey Swingruber got the last goal in the closing minutes to seal the win.

Speck and Swingruber are two of the 10 sophomores on the team.

“This team has good chemistry,” said Van Liew. “We’ve got a young team, but we all like playing together.”

“The older kids have taken the younger kids under their wing, and are helping them with their game. And they’re letting us do that. The younger guys are good about listening and learning.”

Senior defenseman Clark Grabb, the team’s captain, noted the difference from when he was one of the younger players on the varsity team.

“It starts in the locker room. We’re all friends,” he said. “It wasn’t like that when I was a freshman. They weren’t as accepting of younger players. There were cliques; one group here, one group there.”

“We have a lot of 10th-graders this year, and they’re all playing great. Different people are coming up huge in different spots.”

One other constant has been junior goalkeeper Austin Clark, who made 28 saves, including a couple of clutch stops after the winless Cadets closed to within 3-1 late in the second period.

“Austin Clark is keeping us right in games,” said Buffoline. “He’s the type of goalie that if you let him see the puck, he’s going to stop it. They know we’ve got a strong goalie back there.”

His steady play allowed the Spartans to maintain the lead when LaSalle upped the pressure in the final period.

“That’s what’s special about this team. We get in a close game and we figure a way to win it,” said Van Liew. “There’s a big improvement from the past few years.”

“We weren’t good last year,” admitted Grabb. “Obviously, this year, we’re doing much better.”

Buffoline wants his team to be rewarded for its work.

“Our long-term goal this season is to finish in the top half of the league and get a home playoff game,” said Buffoline, whose team is fourth in the league standings with seven points, 21½ points better than fifth-place Bethlehem which had played just four league games. “Last year, we finished seventh. This was a huge point for us tonight, getting us closer to that goal.”

The Spartans’ next four games will be important in obtaining that goal. They host Shenendehowa on Friday and play at Queensbury on Saturday. Next weekend, they host Glens Falls and Saratoga Springs.

“That’s an important stretch,” said Buffoline.

But the Spartans go in feeling good about themselves.

“The confidence definitely goes up when you’re winning,” said Van Liew.

Grabb feels that as long as the Spartans stick to Buffoline’s game plan, they’ll be fine.

“We just try to go one shift at a time, one period at a time,” he said. “Coach always tells us play like it’s 0-0, no matter what the score is.”

Burnt Hills/B. Spa 2 1 1 – 4

LaSalle 0 1 1 – 2

First period – 1, BH/BS, Nick Van Liew (Ian Speck), 9:29. 2, BH/BS, Van Liew, 11:49.

Second period – 3, BH/BS. Chris de la Rocha (Matt Venerus), 5:41. 4, LaSalle, Chris Hunt (Anthony DeMarte, Ben Gardenier), 12:43.

Third period – 5, LaSalle, Zach Watkins (Gardenier, Adam Barna), 4:11. 6, BH/BS, Trey Swingruber (Clark Grabb), 13:13.

Goaltenders – Burnt Hills/Ballston Spa, Austin Clark, 28 saves. LaSalle, Zach Hurst, 10 saves; Kenny Joseph, 10 saves.

[Source: <http://www.dailygazette.com/>]