

Our Athletes

Just missed Ice Hockey eliminated from postseason play

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

John Gradante dove at the puck and slapped it to the ice like a kitten playing with a ball of string. The rebound was driven back to the open net, and the Hall-Southington goaltender dove to his left and knocked it away with his outstretched stick.

On Saturday, Feb. 27, Conard was showering the Hall-Southington with slap shots and fast breaks. With 13 minutes remaining in the regular season, Gradante was doing his best to keep the team's postseason hopes alive.

Ice Hockey

"When you look at the season as a whole, we were headed into the third period in the last game of the season with a chance to make the playoffs," said Warrior-Knight coach Jeff Anastasio. "After graduating 12 players the year before, I think that's a pretty good accomplishment."

The second season of the hockey co-op came to a close without fanfare or celebration. The team posted back to back losses against two of the toughest opponents on the team's winter schedule. Hall-Southington finished with a 7-12-1 record, and the team came within one tie of returning to the

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Jeff Anastasio,
Hall-Southington
ice hockey coach

postseason.

Not bad for a rebuilding year? Next year will be the measure. It may be too late for their three senior skaters—Andrew Green, Steve Breault, and Tommy Carr—but Anastasio said that they sparked this season's unlikely run at a postseason berth.

"The success that this team has next year will be how we measure the mark



JOHN GORALSKI

John Gradante makes one of his 44 saves to keep the Warrior-Knights within striking distance.

Feb. 24
NW Catholic 6
Hall-Southington 1

the seniors left this year," said the coach. "All three of them provided good leadership. Tom, Andrew, and Steve all played critical roles. They all made good defensive plays for us. They scored some big goals for us. Having a large team, a young team, those players set the tone. They showed everybody what they're working for and they set a good example. We had a great level of commitment—even better than we've had in years past."

And that's why the seniors led the team's final push. Conard dominated the pressure in the opening period, but Breault was the one who

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scored. Midway through the first period, the senior skater rushed on the goal, grabbed his own rebound, and gave the Warrior-Knights the early lead.

"One thing we said before the game was that it was critical that we score the first goal, strike early, and play solid defense," Anastasio said. "We did all of those. We got a nice goal on a second effort. Steve Breault scored on his own rebound, and that's something that we've really been preaching for the last month or so."

Hall-Southington led in both of their final contests. Against NW Catholic (12-3-3)

on Wednesday, Nick Mastroianni scored the game's first goal off assists by Kevin SanAngelo and Joe Gambardella. Against division one rival Conard, Breault opened the scoring.

Then, Gradante did the rest. The sophomore goalie faced an onslaught of pressure in both games.

"We were playing a lot of D-zone coverage. Gradante was forced to make a lot of saves and face a lot of second and third chance opportunities," said Anastasio. "It was just a matter of time before they got a bounce."

Gradante collected 36 saves in the 6-1 loss to NW Catholic to start the final week, and he snatched 44 saves in the game that followed.

"Johnny's been playing

great for the last month or so, and he kept us in the game today. He gave us a chance to win, and that's all you can ask for from your goalie," said the coach. "He gave us more than we expected today."

The loss marked the end of the season, but left the young team with some hope for next year. The Warrior-Knights lose just three seniors from the second-year co-op. They return a trio of experienced goalies and one more year of experience.

At the start of the season, Anastasio called his young squad "the first year of a two-year team." The co-op's third season could be the charm.

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