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Sidelines: Knights would like to end Toledo's state title drought

By MARK MONROE BLADE SPORTS WRITER

Mike Higgins, a senior, tallied 42 points for St. Francis last season.

Senior Charlee McAninch is one half of a solid goaltending duo for St. Francis. The other half is his brother, Mychael, a junior.

St. Francis de Sales hockey coach Rob Kuhr embraces the tag of preseason favorite and believes his Knights may be strong enough to end two nagging droughts.

St. Francis is the near-unanimous favorite to win its first Northwest Hockey Conference Red Division title since 1999. But it's another drought that does not sit well with Kuhr and other local coaches: No team from Toledo metropolitan area has won a state title.



Senior Zach Nadolny scored 34 goals and had 27 assists last season for the Knights, who last won a Northwest Hockey Conference Red Division championship in 1999. (THE BLADE/AMY E. VOIGT)

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Two schools south of Toledo, Bowling Green and Findlay, are the only teams from northwest Ohio to claim the ultimate prize. The Bobcats have won six state crowns, while the Trojans have captured two.

Northview came excruciatingly close to ending the struggles just nine months ago. The Sylvania team held a 3-1 lead over Parma Padua Franciscan in the state final before losing 6-5 in overtime.

Northview won its first league title since 1987 last year, but has been hit hard by graduation and it appears St. Francis is primed to break through this season.

The Knights received five of six first-place votes in a preseason coaches' poll. Kuhr said the first goal is to win the NHC's top division, but the definitive aspiration of attaining a state crown is impossible to ignore.

"It's been a long time since a non-Cleveland area team has won a state title," Kuhr said. "It's Cleveland's until someone takes it from them. No Toledo team has ever won a state title. Without question we [the NHC coaches] talk about it. Whenever the East and West sides of the state butt heads, we try to help each other

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Senior Charlee McAninch is one half of a solid goaltending duo for St. Francis. The other half is his brother, Mychael, a junior. (THE BLADE/AMY E. VOIGT)

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The Knights' chances of winning two titles are bolstered by a brother combo in net.

Senior Charlee McAninch shares the goaltending duties with his junior brother Mychael. Each played five division games last year and each had goals-against averages that were under 2.80.

Kuhr also has perhaps the most-talented forward in the area in senior Zach Nadolny, who scored 34 goals and had 27 assists last season. Fellow senior forwards Mike Higgins and Kris Jaeger collected 42 points each last year.

"Before we start dreaming or looking at the big prize, we need to focus on winning the Red Division," Kuhr said.

Northview coach Jim Cooper remains very optimistic despite losing his top four scorers and the division's top goalie.

"While graduation took its toll, we return a potent lineup," Cooper said. "Optimism remains high despite last season's near miss."

St. John's, which has not won a division crown since 1989, appears to have the offensive production back to make a run this season.

Before Northview won the division title last year, Bowling Green had won five straight and eight of the last 10. But the Bobcats finished fifth last year and are expected to place near the bottom again.

Here is a look at the teams in the Red Division listed in order of predicted finish according to a preseason coaches' poll:

St. Francis (24-11-0 overall, 6-4 NHC) has been in three consecutive district title games and has eight seniors and 15 letter winners back.

"We certainly have a lot of experience, leadership, cohesiveness, and continuity," Kuhr said. "These kids have grown up together and played travel hockey together."

Nadolny, a four-year starter, earned first team all-league honors as a sophomore and junior by consistently lighting the lamp.

"He is the best player in the league," Kuhr said. "He has all the tools."

Kuhr said he will rotate the McAninch's in net in each game. "We don't have a No. 1 until March," he said. "It's a battle all season. They're very competitive with one another, but they're also each other's largest fan."

The Knights have two solid defensive units in seniors Brian Bilius and Phil Henzler and juniors Lou Woody and Nate Connolly. Andrew Geiger is a senior captain who plays on Nadolny's line.

"We just need to stay within ourselves and not look ahead in order for good things to happen," Kuhr said.

St. John's (22-8-2, 7-2-1) has 75 percent of its offensive production back from last year.

out."

While Northview came close to putting an end to the dominance of teams based in Cuyahoga County, the two state finalists all hailed from northeast Ohio the previous seven seasons.

The last time northwest Ohio was represented was in 1999 when Bowling Green and St. John's played for the title. The Titans won, but were forced to forfeit, because they used an ineligible player.

"I think everyone is excited," Kuhr said. "We're attempting to emulate what Northview did last year. What they did was completely phenomenal. With as many seniors and the talent we have, we hope to overtake them."



Mike Higgins, a senior, tallied 42 points for St. Francis last season. (THE BLADE/AMY E. VOIGT)

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Senior forward Andrew Heldt was named to the All-NHC first team after scoring 11 goals and dishing out 23 assists last season. Junior forwards Dan Johnson (18 G, 14 A) and Cam Hauenstein (10, 21) also can light up the scoreboard. Sophomore Ray Morris notched 17 goals as a freshman.

Senior defenseman Mike Henson and Mike Callan will be called upon to step up after the loss of standout goalie John Unger to graduation.

But Titan coach Mike Hayes, who enters his fourth season at the helm, said he is confident in junior goalie Tyler Marzec. "He brings in a lot of experience and success and should fill John's shoes. He comes into the season with a 15-0-0 career record as well as a 1.74 GAA."

Hayes said he is concerned with his team's depth and will have to rely on players with no experience, while having others take on different roles.

"If they are able to do that, our success this year is limitless," Hayes said.

Northview (31-4-2, 9-0-1) should remain a threat every time it takes the ice, according to Cooper.

Junior Cody Bourland is the top returning scorer with 29 goals, including six game winners, and 18 assists. Senior Matt Cook (16, 18) and junior Brandon Snead (12, 14) will ensure that Northview continues the offensive fireworks. Juniors Brent Bain and Tyler Cook also should contribute significant points.

The Wildcats also will have a savvy, veteran defensive corps led by seniors Nic Saenz and Ian Kelsey. Juniors Tyler Puhl and Eamonn Reynolds solidify play along the blue line.

Junior Craig Trego takes over for goaltender Bobby McElheney, who lost just once last season. Cooper said he also has a handful of newcomers and improved players that could aid in another special season.

Dan St. Jean takes over a Findlay program that has struggled of late. But the Trojans (16-11-1, 4-5-1) had posted a 417-312-15 record and won two state titles under long time coach Mike Root, who retired after last season.

Senior goalie Sean Brown is the brightest spot after posting a 2.20 GAA last year. Senior forward Jerrod Hartman (29 G, 20 A) was the team's second leading scorer last season.

Fellow seniors Travis Ballinger, Drew Beardsley and Jeremy Horne lead 14 returning letter winners.

"With a lot of returning players, we will be competitive in the division," St. Jean said.

Once dominant Bowling Green (12-16-1, 2-7-1) has 13 returning starters.

"We have good size coupled with decent team speed," said coach Dan DeWitt, who is in his 18th season.

Four defensemen and nine forwards are back from last season, although both goalies have graduated. Senior Jeremy Cross takes over in net.

Seven seniors lead 20 players. Forward Brady Frederick has good size (6-4, 230) and is joined by forwards Rob Yohe and Eric Blaisman. Defenseman Zak Ackenberger is back along with Adam Crawford, Jake Price and Brandon Rabb.

"We need to show the ability to score on a consistent basis," DeWitt said. "We will need to get off to a fast start in league play in order to contend. We must be extremely disciplined and consistently playing at a high level of intensity in order to contend."

Southview (14-15, 0-10-0) has seasoned veterans along the blue line led by senior James Bondy.

Captains Bryan Davis and Casey Karabin are seniors and will see a lot of ice time. Davis is the Cougars' leading returning scorer and Karabin is a hard-nosed fore checker. Junior Justin Phillips also will be a tenacious player, according to coach Wayne Collins.

The major question for Southview is who will take over between the pipes. Freshman Erik Fisher is battling sophomore Matt Comer for the No. 1 spot.

"If we stay disciplined and stay out of the penalty box, we should be fine offensively," Collins said.

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