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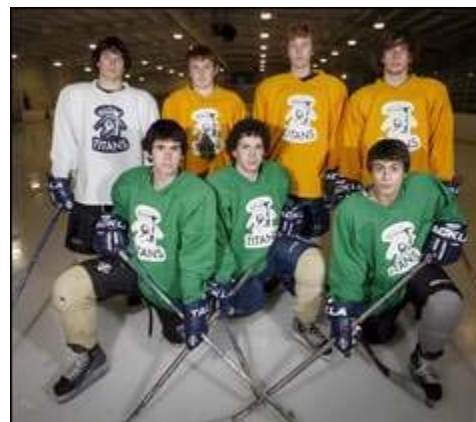
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RED DIVISION

Sidelines: Titans ready to defend state hockey title

By **MARK MONROE**
BLADE SPORTS WRITER

St. John's Jesuit captured the first state hockey title for the Toledo metro area last season, but that momentous accomplishment brings lofty expectations for a team that appears primed to meet the hype.

The Titans ended a drought that lasted 29 years when they beat Parma Padua Franciscan 6-4 in the state title game. With 75 percent of the offense back, St.



St. John's won the state championship last year and has plenty of experience returning with, back row (from left), Luke Stansfield,

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John's is picked to repeat as champions of the Northwest Hockey Conference Red Division.

ChaseParsell, Cam Hauenstein and Dan Johnson and front row (from left) Ray Morris, Mark Stansfield and George Wilkinson. (THE BLADE/ANDY MORRISON)

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But Titans coach Mike Hayes refuses to revel in the feat and prefers to look forward.

"That was last year," Hayes said. "We're taking the approach that from here on out this year is this year. We do not even discuss the state championship. There's no mention of it. If we live in the past, we will get blindsided."

Yet with three 20-goal scorers back, St. John's earned a slight edge over Northview and St. Francis de Sales in a preseason coaches' poll.

Senior Dan Johnson scored 22 goals and dished out 32 assists. Junior Ray Morris tallied 24 goals and added 32 assists. Senior forward Cam Hauenstein, who notched a hat trick in the state final, also is back after netting 23 goals along with 23 assists.

"We're not getting caught up in it," Hayes insisted. "Our success will be our ability to do the little things that we did last year. On paper we may be good, but what you look like on paper may not translate into success."

The Titans went 8-1-1 in the Red Division to win their first league title since 1989. St. John's also put a big dent in the dominance of Cleveland area teams which had a seven-year stranglehold on the state crown. The Titans finished 8-3-1 against Cleveland teams including a 5-3 triumph over Hunting Valley University School in the semifinals.

"We'll take that experience with us, but we must respect everyone," Hayes said. "We know there is a target on our backs. We'll take that responsibility."

Northview made a similar run to the state title game at the end of the 2005-06 season before losing in overtime. That team won the school's first league title since 1987 and reached the state finals for the first time since 1990.

St. Francis, which was picked to win the Red Division last season, got the nod again this year from two coaches. The Knights have 10 returning starters and nine seniors.

"St. Francis and Northview will be solid," Hayes said. "It will be competitive again because on any given night anyone can beat anyone in this division."

Bowling Green and Findlay were the only teams from this region that had captured state titles. But the once-dominant Bobcats are expected to finish in the middle of the pack and the Trojans lost six of their eight leading scorers to graduation. Southview could also surprise some teams.

The NHC season begins tomorrow. Here is a look at the Red Division in predicted order of finish:

Defending state champion St. John's (29-7-3 overall, 8-1-1 Red Division)



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returns a good portion of its offense.

"We'll play four lines for the most part and the scoring will be spread out evenly," Hayes said.

Senior forward Chase Parsell (10 goals, 18 assists) plays on a line with Johnson and Hauenstein. Senior forward Mark Stansfield (12 G, 12 A) teams up with Morris and sophomore George Wilkinson, a transfer from Northview. Junior Luke Stansfield anchors a Titan defense that is young, but talented.

"We have six forwards who had double digits in goals last year," Hayes said. Potential stumbling blocks are a young defense and unseasoned goaltending. Hayes must replace two four-year and one three-year starter on defense. He will start with two freshmen, two sophomores and two juniors along the blue line. Hayes must also find areplacement for goalie Tyler Marzec, who transferred to Whitmer.

But St. John's has opened the nonconference season at 4-0-0 sweeping through a tournament last weekend at Miami University. And Hayes said senior goalie Steven Schmitt (8-1-2 with a 1.83 goals-against average as varsity starter) looked good.

"He was tested and he did real well," Hayes said.

Northview (25-10-1, 7-3-0) is expected to contend again with 12 returning starters and 11 seniors.

Longtime coach Jim Cooper, who is 555-350-32 in 31 seasons at Northview, guided his team to a second-place finish last season.

"We're well balanced on offense and we're strong in goal," Cooper said. Senior goalie Craig Trego posted a 1.96 GAA last season. Senior center Carter Bourland scored 26 goals and had 26 assists last season. Senior right winger Brandon Snead notched 29 assists and 14 goals. Senior defensemen Tyler Puhl (5 G, 16 A) and Eamonn Reynolds (4 G, 10 A) form a solid duo along the blue line.

Cooper said he also likes the offensive abilities of sophomore Mark Hall. But youth on defense is a concern.

"We are a senior-dominated team and should play with more purpose and urgency," Cooper said.

St. Francis (18-12-3, 4-5-1) will be led by a well-knownfigure in the hockey community. First-year Knights coach Brian Kinsella helped the Goaldiggers win two International League Turner Cups in the early 1980s.

Senior forward/defenseman Nick Wawrzyniak is the team's leading returning scorer (14 goals, 15 assists). Senior defenseman Lou Woody had eight assists and five goals last season. Senior defenseman Nate Connolly (1 G, 5 A) has been named captain. Senior center Chris Dyer is new to the team this season.

Senior goaltender Mychael McAninch (3.06 goals-against average) steps in as the full-time starter after sharing duties with his brother Charlee last season.



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"Mychael and our scoring depth from our forwards should help us win some games," Kinsella said.

The Knights must avoid unnecessary penalties and must be more composed and disciplined on the ice.

"The coaching staff looks forward to a great season especially from our returning veterans," Kinsella said. "They should be leaders both on and off the ice. With an excellent work ethic, we should be in the top half of our division."

Bowling Green (19-9, 4-6) once owned the Red Division, winning five straight titles from 2001-05 and eight of 10 dating to 1996. The Bobcats won six state titles since 1980 with the last coming in 1999.

The Bobcats have slipped, but 19-year coach Dan DeWitt hopes 11 returning starters will lead them back to the top. DeWitt said his team should be particularly solid in back.

"We have four returning defensemen, so we should be strong at the blue line," DeWitt said.

The performance of the defense is pivotal early on to allow the young goalies to develop, according to DeWitt (387-129-11 career record).

"We'll need to develop scoring and depth at forward," he said.

Junior Adam Crawford is the top returning point producer (11 G, 20 A). Senior forward Jake Price (10 G, 5 A) also has a proven offensive touch and senior forward Blake Simon should also chip in consistently.

Senior Colin Henning and junior Matt Ruehl lead the strong defensive core.

Findlay (23-7, 6-4), which last won a Red Division crown in 2000, is very young with just three seniors. Of the 24 varsity players, only 11 return with experience. But second-year coach Dan St. Jean said the youth could be a strength and a weakness.

"Being very young, we will become a good hockey team as we get experience," said St. Jean, who lost most of his offensive output.

Junior center Ryan Chance (11 G, 16 A) will be joined by junior forward Tyler Thines (6 G, 2 A) up front. Senior defenseman Ben Bjorling had 13 assists and nine goals last season. Layne Martin is expected to contribute as a freshman.

Southview (10-17, 0-10) could sneak up on teams, coach Wayne Collins said. Senior captain Justin Phillips is the returning leading scorer. Senior Nick Block is a tenacious forechecker. Junior forward Stephen Howard should round out the scoring lost by players who have graduated, according to Collins.

The defense should keep the Cougars in games with seniors Erik Burtch, Kyle Robbins and Stu Drake manning the blue line.

But goaltending duties remain up in the air with sophomore Erik Fisher and junior Matt Coomer battling it out.

“With the combination of young talent up front and experienced players from the blue line back, the Cougars should surprise some teams this year,” Collins said.

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