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Fire meets ice: LU hockey gains popularity as team continues to strengthen

December 01, 2009 | Eric Brown

Ironically, one of the hottest sports at Liberty University is also the coldest. Since the completion of Liberty's LaHaye Ice Center nearly four years ago, the sport of hockey has received tremendous fanfare at LU.

When Liberty hockey first began in the mid-'80s, the university had one team that traveled more than an hour just to practice on the ice. Now, Liberty has three men's teams — one in each division of the America Collegiate Hockey Association (ACHA) — and a women's team.

Over the past four seasons, the Liberty men's hockey team has remained competitive against some of the best club teams in the nation, including Penn State, the University of Illinois and Oklahoma University, ranking in the ACHA top 10 each year.

Apart from travel teams, hockey at Liberty is experiencing growth in other areas, as well.

"Intramural hockey has taken off here at Liberty," said Kirk Handy, LaHaye Ice Center director and head coach for the men's hockey team. "We've even started summer camps where kids can come in and skate. So, not only do we have four teams that are on the ice extensively, but we have a great opportunity for growing the program."

Leading the way for men's hockey this season is senior captain Zac Bauman, senior assistant captain Dave Semenyina and sophomore assistant captain Joe Smith. Together, the trio embodies

everything Handy and his staff look for in on-ice leadership ? talent, heart, consistency and a will to win.

Entering their third year as captains, Bauman and Semenyina have seen it all inside the confines of the rink, from ending Penn State's 10-year ACHA finals streak two seasons ago to being treated for carbon monoxide poisoning following a match during the national tournament in March 2009. While Bauman is the team's primary captain, he said he views the role more as a co-captain.

"It's been a tag team all the way through," Bauman said. "I think we've grown quite a bit over the years in learning how to deal with certain situations and communicate between the coaches and players."

Labeled as a serious leader, Bauman finished the 2008-09 season with 39 points and was a member of ACHA's Academic All-American team. Upon receiving the honor of team captain as a sophomore, Bauman encountered some difficulties when trying to relate to the older players. Two seasons later, he is the team's true older brother, earning the respect of those around him, regardless of age or experience.

"He's become a more consistent player game-in and game-out," Handy said. "He's someone that you rely upon to lead by example [on the ice]. Every game he is consistent with his level of play."

Offsetting Bauman's business-like demeanor is Semenyina, who brings a more laid-back approach as captain. In their first year together, Semenyina, a little older and more experienced, was able to take some of the weight off Bauman's shoulders when it came to leading the upperclassmen.

Although Semenyina is known for being the team's "class clown" off the ice, when the puck drops, the laughing stops. Unlike most defensemen in hockey, the native of Alberta, Canada, is a prolific scorer, leading the Flames in goals the last two seasons. Semenyina's uncanny ability to score from the defensive position earned him the runner-up spot for the ACHA Player of the Year Award on two occasions.

Semenyina is also known as the team's clutch player, putting up goals in much needed or last-second situations.

During the 2008 ACHA quarterfinals, Liberty found itself pitted against the league's most reputable team, the Nittany Lions of Penn State. A true dynasty within the club ranks, Penn State had reached the ACHA finals 10 straight seasons. Before the close of the second period, Semenyina was sent to the penalty box. With the match knotted at one apiece heading into the final period, the assistant captain made a vow to his teammates.

"I'm getting out of the box and we're going to score," he said.

After serving the remainder of his time, Semenyina was released from the penalty box and found the net just minutes into the third period. The Flames went on to post two more goals that period to take the contest 4-1 and advance to the ACHA semifinals.

“That’s the kind of guy he is,” Bauman said of his teammate. “It’s just a huge burden off your shoulders to have a guy like that who you know is going to score a majority of the time.”

Next season, things will certainly be different without the on-ice guidance of Bauman and Semenyina. In the meantime, the two seniors are grooming Smith to be the new leader of the Flames in 2010.

“Joe embodies what we want in a captain just like Dave and Zac do,” Handy said. “He’s consistent in his work ethic on and off the ice.” That’s the thing you look for in your captains? someone who is going to, in the good times and bad times, still be out there willing to battle for your team and willing to set the bar high for the other players.”

Be sure to catch Flames hockey team throughout the remainder of the 2009-10 season. The puck drops on Fridays and Saturdays at 7:30 p.m. at the LaHaye Ice Center. Visit liberty.edu/hockey for a complete schedule.