

Cougars? rise to the top a pleasant surprise

By Jeff Doner

With so many new faces on this year's version of the Junior A Schomberg Cougars, head coach Jim Egerton said he isn't surprised that his team is fighting for a top spot, but he wasn't so sure it would happen this quickly.

With less than 10 games left in the regular season, the Cougars are battling with the Alliston Hornets for second place in the Georgian Mid-Ontario Junior C division standings.

They currently sit one point behind the Hornets and eight behind the first place Penetang Kings with a sparkling 21-6-2-2 record. 'I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a bit surprised where we are, but I always knew that the team had a lot of potential; it was just if we could put it all together. We're still getting better,' Egerton said.

After a short Christmas break, the Cougars skated out to a 4-3 shootout win against Erin on Saturday to start off the final stretch to the playoffs in winning fashion.

This season, the Cougars have been scoring machines, netting the second highest goals in their division with 160. On the other end of the spectrum, the defence and the goaltending have come up strong in allowing only 95 goals thus far.

Taylor Ewart has really stepped into his own this season as Schomberg's veteran netminder.

'He's been really important,' Egerton said. 'He's not a rah rah type of guy. He's very quiet, but he goes about his work ethic and his preparation for games. He's pretty serious when he's got a start; he works extremely hard in practice and off ice, so I think that he leads by example.'

The rookie blueline tandem of Justin Formenton and Nick Chaykowski has been formidable for the Cougars, with the pair boasting puck moving skills, scoring prowess, with Chaykowski also bringing some size.

Chaykowski's shot from the point has made him the team's highest power play scorer with eight goals and he is the team's fifth highest point-getter with 28.

The Cougars have been getting scoring from many different sources, with 15 players reaching double digits.

Blake Culley (17 goals and 49 points), John Gage (15 and 39), captain Christian Muenz (14 and 34) and JP Crescenzi (14 and 30) have been consistent scoring threats for the Cougars.

'I think our depth has been one of our major strengths,' Egerton said. 'If you look at the league as a whole, most teams rely on five or six of their top players and maybe one goalie who plays most of the games, where I think our team it's up and down the whole lineup. There are contributions right from the top down.'

One thing he wants to see is to have penalty minutes come down for his club. The Cougars currently have served 893 penalty minutes, putting them third in their division in that category.

'Our penalty kill has been good, but when it comes to the playoffs in a short series, you can't really be spending an awful lot of time in the box.'

Rookie stay-at-home defenceman Derek Nielly said it has been fun watching his team come together this season and offered his coaches some credit for how the group has grown this season.

'I think it's honestly the coaching. In my personal experience, the head coach and assistants from Jim (Egerton), Doug (Taylor) and Lee (Umansky), they're the best coaches I've ever had. They're really knowledgeable; they know how to put systems in and make good calls. For instance in the Huntsville game recently, (Egerton) called a play and said, 'if you do this play properly, it will work' and it worked.'

From minor hockey to Junior C this year, Nielly said his role has changed from more of an offensive defenceman to a stay-at-home type player, but he said he's willing to do whatever it takes for the team to be successful for the stretch and into the playoffs.

'It's important for people to know their roles and knowing where they have to be on the ice and doing the simple things,' he said. 'If everybody does the things that they're supposed to do, winning should be no problem.'

The Cougars face some stiff competition on the final portion of their schedule, but Egerton said that's not really a bad thing.

'You don't mind playing better teams down the stretch because it gets you playoff ready, but in this league right now, the way it has been the last month, it's anybody's game out there ? you can't take any team lightly, but I think when you play the top teams going into the playoffs, that gets you pretty sharp.'

In their last eight games, the Cougars will play games against the Penetang Kings, Alliston Hornets and Caledon Golden Hawks, teams that happen to surround the Cougars in the standings.

Their next home game will be on Thursday night against the Stayner Siskins at 8:30 p.m. at the Trisan Centre.

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