

Gulf Coast Flames overcome slow start to become state champions

Bantam AA hockey team, which also won Big Bear tournament this season, heads to nationals in upstate New York in April.

By STEVE LEE
Editor, Florida Hockey Life

Muddling along at about a .500 clip, it appeared that a mediocre season might be in store for the Gulf Coast Flames. Thanks, in part, to a significant lineup switch it did not take long for the Bantam AA team out of Ellenton to turn things around for a banner season.

Initially, Flames coach Tyler Watkins attempted to balance his lines up front by spreading out his best scorers, opting not to play them as one unit. After a lackluster 6-4-3 start, however, he decided to pencil in his top three scorers on the No. 1 line and the impact was virtually immediate. It literally made a difference from an average season to a championship one.

That lineup move, coupled with a rejuvenated attitude that grew among the players during a subsequent 20-game winning streak, fired up the Flames. So much so that the team went on to win a state championship and qualify for nationals.

"We started off slow," Watkins said. "We thought we had a good team on paper, but paper doesn't win you anything. Then we went on a little roll. We had some big-time players and they stepped up."

Like their coach, center Max Resnick, left wing Matthew Pointer and right wing Clint Levens could not have been happier with the lineup switch. That trio, dubbed the green line by their coach for the color of their practice jerseys, ignited the Flames' resurgence; not only in regular-season games, but in tournaments as well.

"I think it was a whole team effort. We were all so tight, but it helped us at the end," said Resnick, adding that after the lineup switch "we just started having fun and playing our game, and we all started winning. We've all played at a high level and we've gotten to be friends."

"We were kind of put together to win the states and I'm just glad we won," said Pointer, noting that after the lineup change "we started scoring more and we started playing together better, moving the puck more."

"We know we have each other's back, so we can make no-look passes to each other," Levens added.

The Flames, comprised primarily of 14-year-olds, bounced back from their struggles early on to post an impressive 34-7-3 overall record for the 2017-18 season. So far, the season has been capped by a Statewide Florida Hockey League state title. Gulf Coast has one tournament remaining — the nationals in Amherst, N.Y., a suburb of Buffalo.

For Levens, the team captain, and assistant captain Pointer, it marks their second appearance at the national level. They



The Flames celebrate Big Bear tournament championship. Flames recorded a 3 and 1 record in the series that took place in Clearwater, Oldsmar and their home rink in Ellenton.

were teammates last season on Gulf Coast's U14 squad that was eliminated in the final game.

"Me and Matthew have been through it before, so we played against some really high-level kids," Levens said. "We were saying it wasn't going to be easy. Our mindset is to win it all and we're going to do our best."

"We faced some adversity and we stayed within ourselves and did not give up," added Pointer, who likes his chances at nationals.

Although Resnick did not play in a national tourney last season, he added, "We want it all, but even if we don't it was a great season."

The players' resurgence during the season likely helped them defeat the Junior Everblades 2-1 in a shootout for the state title. That victory avenged an earlier 2-1 loss to the Junior Everblades in the state series, which included a 3-2 shootout win over the Palm Beach Hawks to go along with 5-1 and 5-3 wins over the Junior Panthers.

"They were ready," Watkins said, noting that during the season "we had a lot of close games. We just never gave up. Whether we were winning or losing we just kept working."

In the state final, Levens had a goal in regulation and Resnick scored on a backhand in the shootout. Pointer and Levens scored in the earlier 3-2 win over the Hawks. In all, the green line tallied 12 of the team's 16 goals in the state tourney.

Another shining point in the final game of that series was goaltender Lukas Renaud stopping three shooters in that one-on-one situation.

"He was great," Watkins said of Renaud. "He made a lot of big saves."

See FLAMES, page 24

FLORIDA HOCKEY LIFE

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PAGE 23

FLAMES

From page 23

"People call me Lucky Louky. I love breakaways and shootouts," said the netminder, who also stopped a pair of shooters in that shootout win over the Hawks. "I treat (shootouts) differently. I follow the body and do what I have to do to play the puck."

Renaud, a Canadian whose family relocated to the U.S. when he was 7 and is sometimes trained by former Tampa Bay Lightning goalie Mathieu Garon, said he patterns his game after Montreal Canadiens goalie Carey Price. He is the youngest player on the team and was 13 at the start of the season.

"I've played with older kids for a long time now, so I've gotten used to it," he said. "Some of them are like big brothers to me."

Like his teammates who spoke about at least challenging for a national title, Renaud feels the Flames played a tough enough schedule to win at that level.

"I feel that the competition in Florida for us was really difficult," he said.

Another highlight of the Flames' season was winning the Big Bear tourney. Gulf Coast, playing against U16 AA teams went 3-1 in a series that took place at rinks in Clearwater, Oldsmar and Ellenton.

All-in-all, it has proven to be quite a memorable season for the Flames.




Coach Watkins and the Gulf Coast Flames 2018 U14AA State Championship Team.

"We're mostly built on our forwards and our defense is very steady," said Watkins, adding that Renaud love the big games. He loves the (big) moment."

Rounding out the roster were: Nash Cobbs, Chase Benjamin, Nate Cavanaugh, Curtis Rustin, Anthony Boromei, Jack Faller, Graeme Podsiad, Trace Cowart, Tyler Hauk, Tyler Girsch, Jordan Campo, Adam Custable, Ryan Bahula, David Stenzel and Noah Collazo; along with assistant coach Eric Wessel.

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