



Hockey: Resurgent Cougars fueled by youth



Senior Kenan Diano gets in front of a MKA coach's shot on Monday, Nov. 20. Diano, along with fellow senior Jared Brunner and freshman Sebastian Burns all have a shot at starting in goal this year.

PHOTO BY ANDREW GARDA/STAFF

by Andrew Garda

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As the Montclair Kimberley Academy hockey team kicks off its season at Clary Anderson Arena on Friday, Dec. 1, head coach Tim Cook knows he has a talented team, if a very young one.

“Our forwards will be very strong, we’ve got some really good juniors and some really good freshmen,” Cook said after a recent practice, “but we’re heavy on junior and freshmen class.”

With a team made up mostly of underclassmen, some coaches might accept bumps in the road as the price you pay for youth, but Cook expects them to get things right when they step on the ice.

“Honestly, we’re going to have to improve on things,” Cook said. “But concepts like staying between your man and the net, stick on stick, making sure you identify who you have [to defend], back checking hard to the middle — all those little things, they need to be [there] right from the get-go because they’re not rocket science. We’re not solving the Pythagorean theorem here, we’re just doing things the right way every single shift.”

Keeping things simple, and not letting his team get overwhelmed by the bigger strategic issues is his focus. Cook wants them locked onto to the smaller concepts.

“When I say concepts, I don’t mean systems. Not like a 1-2-2 forecheck. I mean angling away from the net, making sure you don’t get beat up the ice on a back check. Things like that. Those things are huge.

“That’s not skill, that’s will. We need to make sure that’s a staple of our game.”

Those are the things his team can control, Cook said, and what he has the team working on.

“Scoring goals — you can’t always control when you score goals,” Cook said. “You control how hard you work and what you do away from the puck. If we can do those two things right away, we’re going to be competitive in every game. That’s really what I’m focused on.”



MKA head coach Tim Cook follows a player on a pad drill during practice on Nov. 20. Entering his second year as head coach, Cook is looking for his young team to build on last season’s 8-9-4 season.

PHOTO BY ANDREW GARDA/STAFF

The more skill-based things will come over time, according to Cook.

Part of how he does that is with frequent film sessions as well as constant drills on the ice.

“Like, today we had video, tomorrow we’ll have video,” Cook said after practice. “Looking at our scrimmages against St Peter’s and Glen Rock. If we can continue to get better, we’ll be on that upward trajectory with our younger guys. We don’t want to be a one and done team, we want to build a solid program. Part of that starts with the middle school program, and with our young guys [here].”

Cook knows how MKA develops talent, having played for the Cougars from fifth grade until ninth and he credits the overall program for the strength of the kids in his care now. That makes it easier for him to trust that his young players will step up when needed to.

That doesn’t mean he doesn’t need his older players to step up as well, though.

“Our defense is young,” he said as an example. “I think they are going to pick it up quick but we’re [still] going to need the forwards to play good defense, back check hard and be good in their zone. Then if our goalies can make the stops they’re supposed to make we’re in good shape.”

The goaltending position has been one of the more interesting battles in camp. Cook has three goalies — seniors Kenan Diano and Jared Brunner and freshman Sebastian Burns — and says the job is up for grabs.

“They’re all really good kids, as far as coachable, and they work hard,” Cook said. “We’re going to see who steps into the role and who steps up to be the guy on a consistent night.”

As for the rest of the team, Cook is looking for chemistry, which can mean a mix of older and younger players.

“Usually a veteran defender with a younger defender,” Cook said, as an example. “A young guy who needs some help. That’s usually the way they shake out and we’ll see who has chemistry.”

The two defensive linchpins returning for Cook on defense are junior Alan Di Geronimo and senior Judson Potenza. More than likely they will be split up to help support the younger and less-experienced players, though Cook could stick them on the same line as well, which gives him some vital flexibility.

Offensively, Cook is looking for a combination of speed, physicality and playmaking ability on a line. If he can find a mix of those traits in his forward trio, the offense should be very sharp this season.

Three players he'll be relying on to hold together various offensive lines are juniors Oscar Worob and Brian Schindler, as well as senior Jason Gertz.

"Worob ... and Schindler are very good players. Gertz has been a standout soccer and lacrosse player [as well] and is a very good all-around athlete," Cook said.



Freshman Sebastian Burns makes a save during practice on Monday, Nov. 20. Burns is one of three goalies vying for the MKA Cougars' starting goal-tending spot.

PHOTO BY ANDREW GARDA/STAFF

Overall, Cook is pleased by his team, especially his returning players, who he feels confident will be reliable cornerstones for the 2017-2018 squad.

"There are a number of guys who I think we'll need to be successful and who, I think, will take big steps as well."