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For Townies, it's been a long way back to the top

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These are truly the best of times for East Providence High.

Heading into this weekend, the Townies are sitting pretty atop the Division 3-Central standings with a 10-0 record, one of two undefeated teams in the division. Eight of the victories have been by four goals or more. They lead all Division 3 teams in goals scored (65) and fewest goals allowed (6).

And even though head coach Gregg Amore and his crew won't openly suggest it, EP could be playing next month at Schneider Arena for its first state championship.

Life has been superb for the Townies. Everyone has embraced this squad -- from the school's student body and faculty to the community -- and fans have been coming out in droves to see them in action.

After all, it's been nearly a decade since the Townies and their fans savored a season as spectacular as this one. In the 1995-96 campaign, they won the Met C regular-season title with a 13-1-1 record and advanced to the best-of-three state finals, where they lost to Johnston High in three games.

Many fans who followed the Townies' program expected the wonderful ride to continue for years to come, but the exact opposite happened.

In the 1996-97 season, the Townies were 5-10. The following year, they were in last place at 4-17. The year after that, they were 2-19.

The program then hit rock bottom in the 2000-01 campaign when the Townies went winless.

Like most hockey programs that struggle for extended periods of time, rumors soon followed of the team folding and saving the school the large amount of money needed to run a high school program.

"There were whispers about (the team folding)," added Amore. "You have to spend a lot of money to run a team and pay for the buses, the ice, everything like that. No one came out and said it, but you could hear people talking about it."

That's when Amore, who played for EP in the early 1980s and served as an assistant coach for seven years before leaving the squad in '94 to pursue his master's degree, stepped back into the picture and took over the club.

"When I left, we were still in Met B and very competitive," remarked Amore, "but when I came back, (the program) was gone. Not only was it gone, there were just nine kids. And a couple of them weren't very good. We were pulling kids out of class just to try to fill the roster, and our goaltender actually had to be convinced to come out for the team again because he had such a miserable experience the previous year.

"I remember the first week (of practice). I was shaking my head, saying (to myself), 'Why am I doing this? What are we going to do? We're going to get whacked every night!' We had a lot of work to do."

Work the Townies did, and even though they lacked talent, all their hard work paid off at the end, as they finished the season with a 4-15-2 record and a sixth-place finish in the eight-team division.

"Obviously, those four wins were a huge improvement," said Amore. "But just the response that year from the kids and their parents was positive because the kids were at practice every day and working hard. And we were hanging in there. We really couldn't do anything. We really couldn't forecheck hard. There were times we played a 1-2-2 trap all the way up and down the ice just to hang in games and hope for the best.

"But I knew that they were at least buying into what I was selling. The system we play is pretty disciplined. If you're fail in it, it shows up. We play man-to-man in our own zone, which is pretty hard to do, and we play a couple of different forechecks. It took some time (to learn), but they bought into it."

The following year, Amore welcomed 15 skaters to the team, the bulk of them freshmen and sophomores. That team finished with a 6-11-1 record and nearly upset Portsmouth High in their best-of-three series of the state quarterfinals, losing both games by a goal.

"We had a lot of young players who got to play right away and play a lot of minutes, and we were a pretty good team by the end of that season," said Amore. "But the fact that our young players got so much playing time was important. They saw everything, they went to the playoffs, and they played against tough teams, so they know what it takes."

Last season, the Townies continued to climb the ladder, finishing with a 10-10 record, but surprisingly, not making the playoffs. Only the top six squads in Met C qualified for the postseason, and six of the 11 teams had winning records.

"Last year, I thought we were good," added Amore. "We were up to about 20 skaters. We had 10 wins and we had beaten teams ahead of us. But we really didn't get a lot of bounces last year. One thing that happened to us was our flu weekend. We were missing seven players one weekend and lost both games to teams that finished behind us in the standings. And they were both one-goal games. If we would have won those games, we would have 12 wins and made the playoffs."

This year, Amore knew his crew would have a good shot at reaching the playoffs, especially since he only lost two players to graduation and had 18 coming back.

What he didn't know was that some of the newcomers to the team would also make superb contributions.

The Townies boast the top scorer in Division 3 in senior center Louis Peterson, a transfer student from St. Raphael, who had two goals and 10 assists in three years with the Saints (the first two in the Championship Division and last year in Met B). Peterson has 12 goals and a Division 3-best 23 assists for 35 points.

The Division 3-Central's second-best scorer is junior right wing Pat Gormley, a tenacious forechecker with 16 goals and eight assists. Gormley played for La Salle as a freshman before transferring to EP last year and netting five goals and eight assists in the Townies' last nine games.

They are featured on the first line with senior left wing David Hill, who is third in the division in scoring (5 goals, 14 assists) and one of five players on the roster who were freshmen when Amore took over the team.

"It's a perfect line, especially when they're clicking," added Amore. "Even when they don't score, if I could calculate the territorial advantage time -- the amount of time they're in the opponent's zone -- it's staggering. That's been more impressive than even the points."

The Townies' second line could be the first line on most teams, and features junior right wing Ross Amaral (4 goals, 10 assists), junior left wing Mike Cicerone, and sophomore center Tyler Elmasian.

But while the Townies' forwards grab most of the headlines for their team's success, the superb job turned in by EP's four defensemen -- senior Travis Barao, junior Jeff Fontes (8 assists) and Anthony Tavares, and freshman phenom Bryan Soderberg -- gets lost in the glow.

"We have four solid defensemen, and I don't think anyone else in Division 3 has that many," said Amore. "They're the best group I've ever had, and they're the reason we're only allowing 12-14 shots a game."

The best of the bunch, admitted Amore, may be the youngest -- Soderberg.

"Bryan's only a freshman, but he's an elite player," added Amore. "He has every skill you would want in a defenseman. He controls our zone, I don't think he's been beaten all year in a 1-on-1 situation, his turnovers are very few and he adds that playmaking ability you don't find in many defensemen."

The Townies' air-tight defense has made life easier for sophomore goalie Cameron Ford, who has already established himself as one of the division's best between the pipes. In eight starts, he has posted six shutouts, allowed just three goals, and stopped just 112 shots in 270 minutes for a stunning 0.40 goals-against-average and a .974 save percentage.

"When we play good teams, like in last month's (Times Holiday Classic) tournament against Tolman and St. Raphael, he steps up," said Amore. "I know Cam's going to get hurt by the fact that we don't give up too many shots, but I think he's the best goaltender in the league."

Another reason for the Townies' success is their lack of penalty minutes. In their 10 games, they have 60 -- the sixth-lowest total out of the division's 15 teams. Last year, they had the second-highest total with 153.5.

"Our penalty minutes per game have gone down and down and down," noted Amore. "The first two years I was here, it was unavoidable -- we were tired. Penalties come from being tired. When you're tired, you usually do something stupid. But this year, we've been a lot better and we've had it under control."

The Townies will surely need to be under control as they encounter their toughest weekend of the season.

Tonight, they will battle a vastly-improved St. Raphael team (which is 8-5 in Division 3-North, but winners of their last four games) at 7:30 p.m. at Lynch Arena, and tomorrow night, they will duel Scituate High (11-0) in a 7:30 p.m. showdown in Cranston.

"St. Raphael scares me because they can put the puck in the net," admitted Amore. "A lot of teams that we have played have had difficulties getting quality shots, but (St. Raphael) definitely has offensive ability."

"They're a decent team -- they gave us a hard time in the tournament -- and I don't want to look past them. These kids have been talking about Scituate since the first week of the season. Scituate was in the finals last year and they have everyone back. They were going to be the team to beat, and they still are, until we prove otherwise."