

Dec. 11 Fish4Scores.com/JoJo's Athlete of the Week



Starting at the upper right and moving clockwise, Steinert sophomore winger Joe Konrath scores one of his four goals against Lawrence during Friday's victory at Mercer County rink. That made it two consecutive hat tricks for Konrath (Photos by Dennis Symons Jr./purchase photos at www.dennissymons.com).

With help from his linemates/classmates Konrath enjoys goal explosion

By Rich Fisher

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Dec. 11: About six years ago, Joe Konrath went to see a Tampa Bay Lightning-Flyers game at the Wachovia Center.

The rest, as they say is history (So is the name Wachovia Center, for that matter).

Konrath fell in love with the sport of ice hockey from that day on, and that ended up meaning good news for the Steinert High ice hockey program.

This past week, in victories over Nottingham and Lawrence, the sophomore left wing exploded for seven goals, getting a hat trick against the Northstars and a natural hat trick within his four-goal outburst against the Cardinals.

For his efforts, Konrath is the winter season's first winner of the *Fish4Scores.com/JoJo's Tavern Athlete of the Week* for the week ending Dec. 10.

Despite his efforts, Konrath is all about spreading the credit around.

“I don’t really know how to explain this,” he said of his binge. “The team is just really starting to come together and we’re really working well together.

“I think it’s a bit of everything. Right now I’m playing great but I couldn’t do that if it wasn’t for the amount of teamwork that is starting click with the team.”

Much of that teamwork starts on his own line, which has Ryan Zujkowski on the right wing with Tanner Dow centering. The three were teamed as freshmen last year and held their own, and have picked up their level of play this season.

“Last year was my first time playing with Tanner and Ryan,” Konrath said. “I think the fact that we understand each other’s styles of play is what makes us click.”

First-year coach Ryan DeClerico has been impressed by the sophomore connection.

“The key to Joe’s success has been the continuation of building confidence as a line with Tanner Dow and Ryan Zujkowski,” DeClerico said. “This line supports the puck very well and has dynamic movement once in the offensive zone. Joe has made the most of playing on a line with two talented players and they seem to be clicking early on this season.

“It helps that all three of the guys on that line are very talented players. As with any line in hockey, the more you play with the same guys the more chemistry you develop. All three of the guys know where to be and are executing the systems we have put in this year. They use their speed to open up spaces in the neutral and offensive zones. They have really progressed each and every game this season.”

And Konrath has been the beneficiary in the Spartans 3-0 start. Spurred on by the Flyers-Lightning, he began playing with the Lawrence Flame house league team at age 9 and has since moved on to Valley Forge.

Konrath has always been a forward, having played both left and right wing, but predominantly on the left.

His play at the youth level has made him a dangerous player early in his high school career.

“Joe is a very strong skater,” DeClerico said. “He has really good speed and is strong on the puck. His strong stick handling ability combined with exceptional skating ability makes him very difficult for teams to play defense against.

“On and off the ice he is hockey smart. He has been around a high level of hockey for a while, where he has not only developed his technical skill but also tactical skills that help him be in the right place at the right time.”

Konrath said this is the most productive scoring burst he has had since playing hockey, but realizes things can cool off quickly without maintaining a work ethic.

“This definitely brings my confidence level up but I have to keep working hard and doing what I need to do,” he said. “Right now I just feel that I have the opportunity to make something happen whether it’s getting the assist or getting the goal or even just creating a play that gets the team going.”

The one drawback to success, is that it makes other teams more aware of the guy scoring all the goals. But DeClerico feels if teams want to concentrate on Konrath, Dow and Zujkowski will make them pay.

“I would think that teams take note of who is playing well on other teams and strategize around those players,” the coach said. “So I believe he might see a little more attention from our competition. Unfortunately for the opposition, Joe’s linemates can do just as much damage if they have a little extra open space.”

Sounds like a nice situation to have. And to think a Lightning-Flyers game helped make it

come about.