

Feb. 1 Ice Hockey

Hornets play their best game of the season in 1-0 setback to Princeton

By Tony Piscotta

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Feb. 1: After a disheartening loss to Notre Dame last week, the Hamilton West hockey team decided to go back to "just having fun" in Monday's practice according to sophomore defenseman Gerry Gomez.

That approach led to the Hornets' finest effort of the season.

Hamilton (6-10-2, 3-8-1 CVC) held high-scoring Princeton scoreless for two periods before allowing a third-period short-handed goal that turned out to be the margin of victory in the 1-0 Little Tigers' win.

For Princeton head coach Tim Campbell, whose Little Tigers were coming off a big non-conference win against Cranford and are competing with Notre Dame for the CVC's Valley Division title, the game was anything but fun.

"That's a scary thing as a coach," Campbell said. "Give them credit they worked hard. But when you're in a game like that where it's that close, you can give up one goal and that's the game."

Despite out-shooting Hamilton by a 35-8 margin, the Little Tigers (11-4-1, 9-3-1 CVC) were stymied for much of the game due to the goaltending of junior Evan Morris and some outstanding defensive play by Gomez and seniors Shawn Hrymack and Sean Tohill.

The only goal of the game came with 12:12 left in the third period. After the Little Tigers' Patrick McCormick dumped the puck into Hamilton West's end to kill a Hornets' power play, forward Will Greenberg swooped in to take control of the puck and took advantage of some confusion in the Hornets' end; scoring on a wraparound goal.

"That goalie is amazing. He's the best goalie in the league." said Campbell of Morris. "He's a defenseman and a goalie at the same time the way he handles pucks and makes saves."

It would be unfair (and inaccurate) to heap the blame for the Notre Dame debacle on anyone player, particularly senior goalie Allison Pelke, who put up a valiant effort in the face of constant pressure last Thursday.

But the Hornets were clearly a different team with Morris back between the pipes.

"A big part of it is when I am in goal," said Morris, when asked how the Hornets were able to bounce back against what is arguably the league's second-best team. "When they don't see me in net our heads change."

"I knew coming over to the rink in the car that it was going to be a good game. I was a little excited."

The Hornets appeared excited, too, and their heads were clearly in the right place from the start against Princeton.

While much of the first period was played in the Hornets' defensive zone, Hamilton kept Princeton out of the high percentage scoring areas and allowed Morris to see shots clearly.

"A team like that has a lot of good stick handlers and they're clearly travel players. You have to keep them from getting shots and don't give them a chance," said Gomez. "They don't like when you play the body and we didn't let them get a lot of chances."

In fact, West coach Matt Hamilton felt the Hornets did everything they could have done short of winning the game.

"We played the best game we can play," said Hamilton. "They have a team of skaters that is

very skilled and wants to make plays.

"If you can drop forwards into the passing lanes and clog the middle to keep pucks on the outside then the team can't make plays."

And while it appeared at times that the Little Tigers would take over the game, Hamilton felt that their style of play matched well with the type of game the Hornets try to play.

"That plays you our strength," he said. "Their first thought is to stick handle and they weren't a grinding team. They didn't pressure us in our end and we were able to get the puck out."

In the second period, Hamilton's task was made even tougher when the Hornets received what amounted to a seven-minute penalty after defenseman Dave Osnato received a minor and major penalty.

A Princeton tripping penalty killed off some of the power play but when the Hornets received another minor penalty they were forced to defend against a 5-on-3 Little Tigers advantage.

Despite several quality opportunities, the Hornets' were able to keep the game scoreless.

"It's tough when you lose a defenseman and have to kill a seven-minute penalty," said Gomez.

But as they have done all year, the Hornets seemed to thrive on the adversity.

"On that power play that was the most we came together all year," said Gomez.

While the Hornets eventually came up short - and with Tohill forced to play defense in Osnato's absence they were unable to generate much of an attack in the third period - the game was a satisfying effort for a team trying to make the move into the upper echelons of the CVC.

"It's a win in some people's eyes," said Morris. "I wish the goal was more of a 3-on-0 instead of a wraparound on a short-handed goal."

If the Hornets continue to "just have fun" they could make things interesting in their last two regular games - and cause another coach or two headaches in the Mercer County Tournament.