

Jan. 20 Ice Hockey

No matter what the score, Pope and Fuller grind it out for Northstars

By Tony Piscotta

Fish4Scores.com

Jan. 20: In an ideal world, players like Jonathan Pope and Kevin Fuller would have developed their game in travel hockey and then slowly worked their way into a varsity lineup full of experienced players.

At Nottingham, there are only a handful of experienced players so Pope and Fuller see a lot of ice time - usually against players who have played the game for several years and have a high skill level.

While the results in terms of wins and losses don't often come out in the Stars' favor - as in today's 12-1 loss to CVC Valley Division power Princeton - that doesn't stop Pope and Fuller from competing from the opening whistle until the end of the game.

"They both work hard no matter what the score is," said senior captain John Terry, who scored Nottingham's only goal against the Little Tigers. "Even though they're not two of our bigger players they never back down, no matter how good the team is that we're playing."

And on Friday, the Little Tigers, coming off a loss to Hopewell Valley, were very good; scoring three goals in the game's first five minutes and leading 6-1 after the first period.

But to anyone who has watched the Northstars the last two seasons, it is clear that the duo of Pope and Fuller have come a long way since their first season of high school hockey a year ago.

Pope, a junior, had only played roller hockey before trying out for the hockey team as a sophomore. He scored his first goal late in the season a year ago and has three assists this season.

"He's got the heart of a lion," said Nottingham coach Alex Chis-Luca. "He'll go against guys twice his size and if he gets hit he bounces right up and keeps going."

Fuller, a sophomore, can be a character off the ice at times but is tied for third in points on Nottingham this year with 2 goals and 5 assists and has played an integral role for the Stars after seeing limited ice time as a freshman.

"He's a lot better this year compared to last year," said Chis-Luca. "He's gone from being an occasional player to being a consistent player. He's gotten a lot of playing time and he gets a lot more touches of the puck."

Like Pope, Fuller got his start playing roller hockey and skated for the first time with some of his Nottingham teammates in a summer league two years ago. He feels a big reason the two have improved is that they tend to push each other and work together in practice.

"We try to do the same drills together and we've gotten some chemistry," said Fuller.

Pope agreed that their work in practice has led to much of the success the two have had.

"In practice we try and get better and we do the same drills and when we do group things we try and challenge each other," said Pope.

Some of the Stars' more experienced players, such as Terry and Kyle Ballschneider, have also been a big help, according to Pope.

"They help us a lot," said Pope. They give us tips a lot and always try to help us. We can watch what they do and it helps."

And as Pope and Fuller continue to learn and develop, the Northstars should improve as well.

After facing two of the CVC's top teams - Notre Dame and Princeton (8-4-2, 7-3-1 CVC) - in back-to-back games this week, the Northstars (2-14, 0-10 CVC) should be competitive in their final

five regular season games. In addition to facing St. Joseph-Hammonton twice, Nottingham plays Patriot Division rivals Lawrence, Steinert and Hightstown.

Lawrence has won just two of its last 12 games while Steinert is coming off a seven-game losing streak (though the Spartans have looked much better in their last two games, losing 2-1 to Hopewell Valley and tying Hamilton).

The Stars and Hightstown have split two games this season. The Rams won 6-3 in December in the second game of the season. Nottingham got its first win of the season against the Rams in the consolation game of the Hornets Holiday Tournament; winning 2-1 when Terry scored late in the game.