

Jan. 25 Ice Hockey

Pelke does the job handling toughest assignment of her goalie career

By Tony Piscotta

Fish4Scores.com

Jan. 25: The assignment was a piece of cake for Hamilton West senior goalie Allison Pelke.

Just step in for starting goalie Evan Morris and shut down Notre Dame, a team that is undefeated in CVC play and has lost just once this season (against prep power Lawrenceville); allowing Morris to skate out and help a Hornets forward corps that was missing two players.

"This year she's leaps and bounds ahead of where she was last year," said Hornets' coach Matt Hamilton, explaining his confidence in starting the inexperienced senior against the league's toughest team. "We were short a couple of players and a little overmatched but she stepped in earlier in the year in a game against South and we almost won, it was 3-3 late in that game.

"(Notre Dame) is head and shoulders above the rest of the county and that's tough on Allison. It's not an easy task. But I thought she did the best she can and did a heckuva job."

While things did not work out in Hamilton's favor score-wise, Pelke continued to battle throughout the game.

The deeper, more talented Fighting Irish eventually blew the game open with three short-handed goals on a Hornet power play late in the first and then added five goals in the second period to end the game 10-0 after two periods. But for Pelke, who entered the game with a 2-1 record after recording wins against Nottingham and Hightstown, the game marked a big step up in competitive level.

And she responded to the task.

Despite admitting to being nervous after being told after the last game that she would be getting the start tonight, Pelke and the Hornets were able to keep the Fighting Irish at bay for the games first six minutes before allowing a goal - and then had a few chances of their own.

The game turned from being tightly contested to a one-sided affair after Notre Dame's Tom DeMuis was sent off for tripping with 4:10.

With the Hornets trailing, 1-0 and looking for the equalizer, the Irish struck quickly, and then struck again, and again - scoring three times in 44 seconds.

"One went in and then was just one after the other. We weren't expecting it," said Pelke.

The first period ended with the Hornets being out-shot 12-5 and trailing 5-0.

As in the first period, the Hornets skated on even terms for much of the second period - and it appeared that they might take the game to the third period after allowing just a single goal in the first nine minutes.

But a four-goal out-burst by Notre Dame, including the first career goals for Nick Bonavico and Brandon Tornquist, sealed the final margin and made the third period unnecessary.

While the loss to Notre Dame was discouraging, and leaves the Hornets (6-9-2) in precarious position in terms of reaching the New Jersey Public School B tournament, it does not diminish the accomplishments Pelke has made this season, in just her second year of playing hockey.

Pelke said she first became interested in the sport watching the Flyers and has fit right in since joining the Hornets as Morris' back up a year ago.

"He (Morris) helps me a lot and he helps me with my confidence, too." said Pelke. "We've become pretty good friends from last year to this year."

In fact, camaraderie is a big part of the success the Hornets have enjoyed this season despite moving up from the Patriot Division to the tougher Valley Division, which includes heavyweights Notre Dame and Princeton as well as West Windsor Plainsboro-South.

"They all accepted me on the team and we're all friends and hang out outside of hockey."

And for Pelke, it looks like her burgeoning hockey career is just starting. In addition to competing for the Tiger Lillies club team, she is hoping to play hockey in college as well - possibly for the women's club team at Rutgers.

After standing toe-to-toe with a team like Notre Dame, she should be more than ready for the task.

The Hornets face three of the league's top teams in their final three regular season games - Princeton, West Windsor-Plainsboro-South, and Robbinsville - and then have an opening round Mercer County tournament game versus a yet-to-be-named opponent before the state playoff cut-off date (Feb. 13).

If they can win three of those four games, they may impress the powers-that-be enough to earn an at-large bid.