

Sports

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(P11)



Chris McCosky

The year of the Pats

Notes from the title chase...

IT'S FUNNY what goes through your mind at times.

While Livonia Franklin was determinedly marching toward its first state softball championship last Saturday, I couldn't shake the image of a photograph we ran last year after the Pats fell short in the state championship.

Remember? The one of a crying Franklin pitcher Tracy Letcia wrapped in her father's arms. The photograph captured the hurt and frustration felt by all close to the Franklin team.

I witnessed the same scene Saturday, only the emotions, equally intense, were of a different origin.

While the Patriot players waited to accept their championship medals, Ron Letcia stood in the background watching, fighting desperately, unsuccessfully, against the tears of pride welling up in his eyes.

Finally he gave up the fight and called out to his talented and gritty daughter. Again a tear-stained Tracy lost herself in her father's arms.

The caption read: "Same Place Next Year, How Sweet It Is."

I SEEM TO notice subtle moments like that more so than the nuts and bolts goings-on at such activities.

Like when Maria Vassellou swatted her triple in the top of the 20th inning against South Lyon, breaking up the 9-0 madness — I didn't pay much attention to Vassellou or the two runners preceding her. My attention was glued to South Lyon's centerfielder. The poor girl could not escape her grief and I felt sick for her — I would have offered to help her dig the hole she was dying to crawl into if I could.

She reminded me of Curt Flood in the 1968 World Series. Flood mis-pitched Jim Northrup's fly ball into a triple, which ultimately decided game seven.

I secretly felt sorry for Curt Flood, too.

I NOTICED Carolyn Smith a lot Saturday. I spent a lot of time watching her reactions to things. Smith was (he) one of the best athletes to come out of Franklin.

When she was a junior, she helped Franklin stun favored Livonia Stevenson in the district semifinals. The Pats were then blasted by Bishop Borgess in the finals.

In her senior year, Smith came within one game of winning the state title.

Last Saturday she watched her Patriots win it without her. It was both a happy and sad day for Carolyn Smith.

LEE CAGLE is a good man, I don't care what anyone says. You know him as the successful volleyball and softball coach at Stevenson. I know him as someone who gets a big kick out of helping young people succeed in athletic competition.

He played the role of batting practice pitcher for Franklin this weekend. He threw BP and offered helpful advice to the Patriots from the regional tournament through the final out Saturday.

Charlie Mascarello had made eight straight outs before coming to bat in the 20th inning Saturday morning. Cagle, sitting behind the backstop, yelled out to her: "Watch her (the pitcher's) hips and get the bat out in front." Mascarello nodded to Cagle and rapped the next pitch into left field for a hit. She quietly thanked Cagle afterwards, as did Franklin coach Joe Epstein.

Franklin, by the way, is the team that eliminated Cagle's Spartans from the state tourney.

UNSUNG HEROES: Kim Godfrey, the sophomore catcher who played JV ball until the state tournament, then played near perfect ball for six games. She had only one passed ball in 27 innings Friday-Saturday.

Shelly Lankford, who opted to skip her ACT tests to play left field for the Pats on Saturday.

Maria Vassellou and Kris Roman, two steady players who solidified Franklin both in the field and at the plate.

Gayle Chesadole, who always seems to have a smile on her face and who stepped into the third base role without flinching after Patty Wikson was injured.

And last, Joe Epstein. The man probably doesn't have all the answers when it comes to the Xs and Os of the game, although he has most of them. More importantly, Epstein built a sense of trust and confidence between himself and his players. He kept his team together despite an early slump, and in the end he had his players convinced they could not get beat at the wire this year.

A FITTING CONCLUSION: As the raindrops poured over Ranney Field, as players, parents and fans hugged, high-fived and prepared to high-tail it home, two veteran Franklin coaches shook hands at home plate. Armand Vigna, the football coach who won Franklin's only other state crown, slapped skin with Epstein.

"Congratulations, coach, great job," said Vigna.

"You know the feeling, Armand," Epstein said. "You know the feeling."



Mike Vellucci and his mother, Judy, discuss his recent signing with the Hartford Whalers of the National Hockey League.

STEVE FECHT/staff photographer

Pro material?

Vellucci signs NHL pact with Whalers

By Tom Henderson
staff writer

The long comeback has ended for Mike Vellucci of Farmington, who has signed a contract to play professional hockey with the Hartford Whalers of the National Hockey League.

The road to the NHL has been up, down and up for the 19-year-old defenseman.

He was drafted by the Whalers in June of 1984, but broke a vertebra in his back in a car accident that July, spending three months in a body cast and sitting out a year from hockey as he and doctors wondered if he'd ever be able to play.

Vellucci was a passenger in a car driven by Al Iafate of Livonia when the accident occurred. They were driving back from a team picnic near Toronto. Iafate was able to

continue his career and is a defenseman with the Toronto Maple Leafs.

"I was apprehensive if I'd ever play again," Vellucci said Tuesday in his parent's home on Lakespur. "I was down for the three months I had the cast on. It was painful wearing it. And then there were the effects of getting it off. My skin stunk from all that time inside it, and I had no mobility."

THE CAST came off in February of 1985. Then came the painful rehabilitation process, with a rigid body being stretched and pulled by therapists. Muscles that had atrophied had to be rebuilt. His legs and cardiovascular system had to be reconditioned. And, most importantly, Whaler scouts had to be convinced he could still play with the big boys of pro hockey.

Vellucci did the convincing this

past season for the Belleville Bulls of the Ontario Hockey League, a top-notch junior league that serves as a feeder program to the pros.

"I had a good year, but I started off real slow," said Vellucci. "About Christmas time I started to come on. I got a lot of points, but I also got a lot of penalty minutes. I'll play the power play, I'll kill penalties, and I'm not afraid to fight."

"I like to rush the puck a lot, too, but the coaches don't," he said, laughing. "You gotta pick your moments, which I'm learning how to do."

Vellucci finished as the eighth leading scorer among the league's defensemen and helped lead his team to the finals of the OHL playoffs in May.

Following the playoffs came negotiations between the Whalers and Vellucci's agent, Rick Curran of To-

ronto, a well-known and well-respected agent in NHL circles.

The negotiations were successful and Vellucci will join the team in training camp in September. In the meantime, he lifts weights, rides a stationary bike and plays outfield and second base on his father's softball team in Farmington, O/E Leasing.

HOCKEY IS in Vellucci's blood. His mom, Judy, is a longtime fan of the game, and his four brothers all played. Perry, 34, played junior hockey for Padlock Pools, as did Pat, 22, Frank, 21, quit at 15 to concentrate on football, baseball and softball, and Mark, 14, continues to play avidly. (Sister Mary, 17, was a second baseman this season for Farmington's varsity softball team.)

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Observer close-up: Boxing

Packs of hungry fighters flock to downtown center

By Tom Henderson
staff writer

Noon, June 11.

Vince Hopper was the first boxer to arrive at the small, surprisingly bright gym with the glass brick ceiling at the Coleman Young Center in downtown Detroit.

The young light-heavyweight from Westland was wrapping up preparations for his fight Tuesday night at the Premier Center in Sterling Heights. The fight was an eight-round, his last before moving up to 10-rounders and better fighters.

To help get him ready, he will spar this day with a man who once fought for the light-heavyweight world championship.

Jim MacDonald may have lost to Michael Spinks — he suffered a broken nose in the eighth round but wasn't knocked down or out — but he had previously knocked out the world's No. 1-ranked light-heavyweight and is a big man at the Coleman Young Center. Big biceps, big right hand, big reputation.

Hopper's going into Tuesday's fight, he was 9-0 as a pro but still got behind the ears, as boxers go, he's a pup.

"I used to fight on the streets,"

said the 24-year-old as he taped his hands in the silence of the empty gym. "I heard there was a boxing club in Livonia. Me and a buddy went down there and I've been at it ever since."

The club was Paul Soucy's Livonia Boxing Club. Hopper now fights for ABC Productions of Oak Park, training six days a week. At Young and fighting once a month at places like the Premier Center and Hillcrest Country Club, Mt. Clemens.

It's a long way from Cobo Arena, light years from Las Vegas and Atlantic City and the big bucks of pro boxing. But, it's a start and Hopper, who now lives in Farmington Hills, is happy with the way things are going.

"This is a full time job for me. I only had three fights my first year (1984), but this year is going pretty good for me."

It is warm and humid outside, getting ready to storm inside it is hot and the air so thick you can grab a handful and squeeze the water out. Perspiration beads up on Hopper's forehead.

"It doesn't take much to work up a sweat in here."

Hopper, a 1979 graduate of Livonia Franklin, talks about his friend, Daga Gorgon, and their plans

to get married "when I start making more money. She likes me boxing. She likes it a lot. She almost likes it more than I do."

12:25 p.m. There are 25 boxers and trainers in the small gym. They are taping hands, doing sit-ups, stretching, quietly preparing for the two hours of intensity to follow.

There is one ring, a couple of heavy bags wrapped in duct tape, a couple of speed bags, an inclined bench for sit-ups and scattered about the floor, bags filled with head gear, protective kidney and groin equipment, boxing gloves, tape.

One plastic bucket sits in the center of the ring. Later, as the fighters spar, they will share the bucket between rounds, spitting saliva or blood, sometimes hitting the bucket, usually hitting the floor with a spat.

Hopper enters the ring and shadow-boxes, dancing around as MacDonald, sinister looking and powerful compared to Hopper's boyishness, finishes taping his hands. MacDonald also will fight Tuesday, headlining the card in a fight with Artiel (Bam Bam) Lawhorn for the state light-heavyweight title.

It is a card filled with nicknames, Bam Bam, Ice Tea, The Tank and

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