

High school RoughRiders growing into a contender

Cedar Rapids team in second place in Midwest league

By Jenna Novak, Prairie senior

CEDAR RAPIDS — Two years ago, the high school RoughRiders had zero wins.

This season, they have 16 wins and have qualified for the Midwest High School Hockey League playoffs for the third time in program history.

Head coach Tony Paoli has led the team to the best season in recent history. Paoli played hockey until he graduated from high school and didn't want to be finished, deciding to coach the high school RoughRiders.

"Hockey is truly a sport that once it is in your blood, the passion will remain with you for your entire life," Paoli said in reply to email questions.

He is the eighth coach in the team's 13-year history. His goal was to give the program stability.

It seems he has accomplished that goal as the RoughRiders head into the final weeks of the season.

"Seeing their confidence grow is a special thing to witness," Paoli said.

Most of the team has played together since they were in elementary school and come from schools all over Eastern Iowa, including Cedar Rapids Prairie, Washington and Jefferson, Linn-Mar, Iowa City West, Solon and Benton Community.

They keep improving each year.

"The biggest improvement I have seen is that the team is now confident they can play and win against any of the teams in our league," Paoli said. "It has been a pleasure to watch them grow, not only as hockey players, but also as young men."

Alexander Paoli of Washington leads the team with 14 goals and Ryan Carlson of Kennedy has a team-best 10 assists and 28 points. Goaltender Eric Wisnousky of Prairie leads the team with 13 wins.

Leadership has played a huge role in the success of the program this year.

"They believe in themselves and their teammates," Paoli said. "When someone is having a bad game, there is always someone there to provide their teammate motivation to go out on their next shift and perform their best."

The postseason is rapidly approaching and the RoughRiders are hoping for the best finish in program history. They are 16-7 overall with 35 points, eight behind leader Sioux City.

"The number one goal I have for the team is to play their best hockey of the season," Paoli said. "If they do that, then they can be proud of whatever the results will be."

The RoughRiders host the Waterloo Warriors on Senior Night on Saturday at the Cedar Rapids Ice Arena. The JV game is at noon, the varsity at 2 p.m.