



Chris Unterstein (33) leads the Pride with 72 points and is one of 25 finalists for the Tewaaraton Trophy, lacrosse's version of the Heisman.

Hofstra flying into lacrosse tournament

By Eddie Timanus, USA TODAY

Though Hofstra is not a newcomer to collegiate lacrosse, fans of the Hempstead, N.Y., school have waited a long time for the Flying Dutchmen to produce a season like this. But the flying has been mostly under the radar thanks to the extensive coverage of the troubles at Duke, as the Hofstra coach knows all too well.

Hofstra, now known as the Pride, enters the NCAA Tournament Sunday against Providence riding a school-record 16-game winning streak. Its No. 2 ranking in the polls is also the highest in program history, while its No. 3 seeding ties its previous high from 1973. With a first-round home game and a short trip to Stony Brook, N.Y., for the quarterfinals, Hofstra (16-1) would seem to have a clear path to its first Final Four appearance in the NCAA era.

"I think for most of us in Division I, the goal is the Final Four," Pride coach John Danowski says. "I don't know if everybody sets the goal of winning the national championship, but I think we all try to get to the Final Four because mediawise that's the big stage. And once you get there, anything can happen."

That Hofstra has never been past the quarterfinals might come as a surprise to those familiar with lacrosse geography. Despite its prime location in the lacrosse hotbed of Nassau County on Long Island, N.Y., Hofstra has had trouble keeping up with the short list of elite programs. Long Island's top high school prospects often head south to Johns Hopkins or Virginia or north to Syracuse.

In fact, Danowski's son is at Duke where he was one of the Blue Devils' top players before the season was canceled after rape allegations stemming from a team party.

The Pride missed the playoffs altogether the last two years. Their most recent tournament run in 2003 was brief, ending with a first-round loss to Massachusetts.

"That team had a combination of seniors and freshmen," Danowski says. "Those last two years we were devoid of a lot of experience. In 2004 we were 4-10 and those younger kids were thrust into

situations they just weren't ready for. Last year we were 8-8 with two one-goal losses. Those kinds of games can turn your whole season around."

Danowski says he is hopeful that this, his 21st season at the helm of a program that began in 1949, is the one that can put Hofstra consistently in the championship hunt. "That's certainly the hope, that people will recognize the place as providing a great opportunity to get an education and to play at the highest level and have success," he says.

But things didn't look nearly as promising after the season opener, an 11-7 loss at Massachusetts. That night after the trip back, Danowski recalls, the coaches met with the seniors.

"We asked them to write down their personal legacies to the program," he says. "We had them read them to each other. And the guys just started looking around at each other and saying, 'We haven't accomplished much.' "

Recalls senior attackman Chris Unterstein: "That really hit guys hard. We stressed the point about legacies and what we wanted to leave behind. Nobody had much to say. We had a good freshman year, but nobody other than (defenseman) Brett (Moyer) had any individual accolades. It just hit home that we could fly through here for four years and not have much to speak of."

Danowski believes the seniors came out of that meeting determined to be not just players but leaders.

"They've always been good kids through those first three years," he says, "but there was just something missing. There was just a lack of confidence in big situations. Nobody wanted to mess up and let their teammates down."

By the Pride's next outing, a 14-4 win against Brown, the confidence was beginning to show.

"You could just feel it and see it," junior attackman Athan Iannucci says. "Guys were just doing the right things at the right times."

The big breakthrough came with wins against defending national champion Johns Hopkins, North Carolina and Princeton in an eight-day stretch. March ended with a thrilling 10-9 overtime win against perennial Colonial Athletic Association nemesis Towson. The wins kept coming, finally culminating Saturday night with a 12-6 triumph against Delaware for the Pride's first ever CAA tournament crown.

"They're for real," Towson coach Tony Seaman says. "You don't beat Hopkins and Princeton like they did without being for real."

But even as the dream season was unfolding, Danowski found himself struggling sometimes to share in his team's joy. Danowski's son, Matt, is one of the top attackmen on the Duke squad that has been the subject of so much negative attention since a woman hired to perform as an exotic dancer accused three team members of raping her at a party in March. Matt Danowski is not one of the two players charged.

"I'd be foolish to say it didn't," John Danowski says when asked if the situation with his son's team affected him. "When it first came out and everything was in limbo, that was really hard. Coaching really was a job. You just came and did your job, but your heart was somewhere else. ... There was a

day when I said to them (his team), 'Fellas, I'm sorry I haven't been myself. I promise I will be from now on.' "

Unterstein says: "Any normal person in his situation would have a hard time coming in working every day. He's enlightened us about it and just told us to learn from it. I couldn't be happier with the way he's dealt with us. I'd say it's given us a little extra inspiration to win for him now."

Danowski talks to Matt about every other day. Matt, a junior, plans to stay at Duke, his father says. The future of the men's lacrosse team grew a bit brighter last week when a committee report to the school president recommended against discontinuing the program.

"Matt is only eight classes away from graduation," Danowski says. "He loves his friends, and he loves his classmates, both on and off the team. And he loves the place."

Duke might have a legacy of its own in this tournament. The Hofstra attack resembles the unit that led the Blue Devils to the championship game a year ago. Unterstein, who co-leads the Pride with 72 points on 38 goals and 34 assists, quarterbacks the offense like Duke's Dan Flannery. Iannucci, a right-handed finisher with 57 goals including four in the CAA title game, is the Matt Danowski of the group. Those two were among the 25 remaining players under consideration for the Tewaaron Trophy, the lacrosse Heisman. Joining the mix this year was freshman Tom Dooley, a prized left-handed shooter with 35 goals who can be compared with Duke's Zack Greer.

"It's funny that we balanced ourselves a little bit after the Duke attack," Danowski says. "Those are their roles, and they've embraced them. They have different styles, and they complement each other."

The Pride defense is also outstanding, allowing 6.2 goals a game. Moyer, the CAA defensive player of the year and also a Tewaaron candidate, anchors a veteran unit in front of goalie Matt Southard.

With one more victory, Hofstra will reach another milestone by matching the Division I record of 17 wins in a season established in 2005 — by Duke.