

# CLIPPER SPORTS

## Sabres win lacrosse championship

### *With a little help, rookie coach leads Springfield Collegiate to title*

By Tony Zerucha

Without a coach, the Springfield Sabres field lacrosse team almost folded. That was before first-time coach Scott Harmatiuk stepped up and, with a little help, led them to a championship.

Springfield has a long lacrosse history. Several high school players, including Harmatiuk's son Mason, have played the game at a high level. The 2022-23 team lost in the finals, but there was plenty of optimism heading into this season.

Then came trouble. The former coach made a college team, leaving him unable to return. Organizers searched for a coach, but had no luck.

Enter Scott Harmatiuk, who has coached many sports but never lacrosse; his only experience was

watching Mason play. Wanting to ensure the kids, especially the Grade 12s, had another season, Harmatiuk accepted the challenge.

He started with what he knew: breaking down the game into its components and teaching the fundamentals. With many players having never played lacrosse, this was an excellent place to begin. Coach Harmatiuk tapped Mason and the other veterans to lead the drills.

That was only the beginning of the challenges. Because of the rain, the Sabres held preseason practices indoors in a much smaller space. That meant they couldn't use lacrosse balls; rubber balls were substituted.

"It was hard to do," Scott admitted. "It was indoors. Plus, we had a wide range of experience



Photo supplied

The Springfield Sabres were down at halftime, but kept their composure, eliminated penalties and scored late goals to defeat Oak Park 6-4.

levels. You couldn't make a drill too complicated or too slow and boring to lose the experienced kids."

"The mix of experience is something every team in

the league has to deal with, but we did a great job of utilizing each kid's strengths, and everyone had a role," Mason said. "We had a good base of players that we knew were going to show up, but what got kids to show up was the reputation of my dad as a coach and the fact that we believed we could make any group of players into a winning lacrosse team."

The Sabres prepared as best as they could for the upcoming season. A few days before the first game, rain again forced them indoors. Then, their gym booking was cancelled, so it was on to the science room for a rules discussion. The veterans knew some of the opponents on the first team, so they devised a strategy.

Springfield narrowly lost the first game 9-7 but went undefeated with two wins and three ties over their next five. They finished 2-2-3 in the regular season, good for third place

in a league where only three points separated the top five teams. The Sabres' two wins were against the top two teams.

The Sabres played the last-place Glenlawn Lions in the opening playoff game. It was a close contest, with the Sabres pulled out a win in the final moments. The story was the same in the semi-final, with the Sabres again winning in the last minute.

A confident Sabres team arrived for the championship game against the Oak Park Raiders, a team they had beaten and tied in two games this season. Springfield started strong but found themselves down by halftime. They kept their composure, eliminated the penalties, scored late goals, and earned another championship banner for SCI with a 6-4 win.

"I don't think anyone expected us to win league-wise," Scott said. "We didn't have a real field; we drew some lines on a

baseball field and practiced there. We didn't have a large coaching staff. Everything was stacked against us, but it worked out how it should have."

Mason said he always knew his dad was a great coach who led him in several sports, but never field lacrosse.

"We knew that we were going to have to learn from each other if he was coaching," Mason said. "The older players and I were coming off a championship loss last season, so we had very clear expectations of what we were trying to achieve."

"Our three attack men, including me, have played lacrosse for a long time, so we had to help guys figure out how to use their sticks, shoot, pass and play defence. But it was also our senior goalie, Eric Bartel, and my dad who did a great job adding a structured defence and good communication, which they did a great job of doing."

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