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Teamwork is the same in any language Paul Sokoloski Opinion

By: Paul Sokoloski

Some kids came down from Canada. A couple others showed up from Russia. Others never had to leave the Wyoming Valley.

They came from different backgrounds, different styles, different states and different countries to join forces at the Revolution Ice Center as members of the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Junior Knights.

And together, they discovered what bridging their differences can do.

“It’s probably the best team I ever played on,” said Paul DeNaples, a defenseman who lives in Scranton.

That’s not just because their youth hockey team for 14-year-old players is having so much success on the ice.

The Knights are 22-2 overall, 7-0 on top of the Atlantic Youth Hockey League’s Bantam Major Division and ranked eighth among 108 teams in the country.

But it’s the camaraderie they’ve developed together that really makes this season such fun.

“We bond as a team,” said Alex Rowella, a forward from Connecticut.

That connection didn’t come instantly. Head coach Oleksandr Vasko – who started the Knights programs six years ago – wasn’t sure if it would come at all.

Especially when a group of kids who were such strangers to one another suddenly watched their locker room turn into a melting pot of international players.

The Junior Knights have four players from Russia, three from Canada and one from Ukraine on their 20-man squad.

“I was, like, scared to talk to them,” said forward Marcus Joseph, a defenseman from Mountain Top who attends Crestwood High School and has played in the Knights’ lower level since he can remember. “In the past, we only had one or two kids from out of the area who only lived an hour-and-a-half away.

“This time, they’re from different countries.”

How do you get accustomed to those differences? How do you even communicate with Russian players who don’t speak your language when you don’t speak theirs?

“Now, they kind of know English,” said defenseman Derek Hamelin, who’s from Quebec. “Before, it was kind of like sign language.”

Maybe it’s a sign of the times, but the egos Vasko worried about never really clashed.

“It’s all superstars. Where they came from, they’re the best players,” said Vasko, who came from the Ukraine to play minor league hockey in the United States Hockey League in the early 2000s and stuck around Northeastern Pennsylvania to coach the Knights. “No more superstars now. Everybody’s fine. Everybody understands. Now we have a *team*.”

To assist with that point, his assistant Scott Lewis rattled off about eight names trying to identify his top player, because it’s impossible to pick just one.

“Every game, it seems like everybody’s doing the scoring,” said Lewis, whose son Gavin is one of the two goaltenders for the Knights.

And with each goal, everyone on the Knights is doing the roaring.

“That’s the one thing I’ve been surprised about,” Scott Lewis said. “There haven’t really been any cliques.”

Instead, the Knights are all about getting their kicks, by sharing cultures developed countries apart. It's how a team with the potential for division instead finds a link that takes them to the top of its division.

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