

Canadians in the NCAA – Playoff Edition

May 11, 2011 by J.P. (Jason) Donville

Over the course of the next twenty days the NCAA lacrosse community will come together to crown Women's and Men's National Champions in three divisions. As the popular NCAA TV commercial poignantly states, more than 99% of the student athletes who compete in this test of athletic skill and endurance will turn pro in something other than the sport that they play. Most will go on to live fairly ordinary but important lives as school teachers, nurses, lab technicians and sales managers. However, for the next twenty days, they are the stars and this is their show. This is the NCAA Lacrosse Championships.

With this year's tournament selections (released Sunday night) there appears to be relatively little controversy as to which teams got in and which did not. In Division I it would have been nice to see Colgate get in on the Men's side and Ohio State on the Women's side given the terrific seasons that both teams just completed. Similarly, Le Moyne in Division II must be really disappointed at being left out although their exclusion says more about the small number of teams (4) in the Division II Championship than any major flaw in the selection process. From a Canadian perspective we got most of our wish list with the possible exception of Stony Brook in Division I which lost its chance to win its way into the NCAA tournament with a tough loss to this year's Cinderella team Hartford. Overall, the selection committee appears to have done a great job of making sure the best teams got in.

This week's edition of "Canadians in the NCAA" will follow a slightly different format than prior weeks as I will provide a brief description of key games involving "high impact" Canadians in the upcoming NCAA Championships.

Division I Men's – Hartford is the Feel Good Story This Year but Syracuse is Still the Favorite

Syracuse vs. Siena – There will only be three Canadian's in this game but the top scorer on each team does brush his teeth with Maple Syrup so it should be exciting for Canadian fans nonetheless. Stephen "Killer" Keogh (Toronto Beaches) leads the Big Orange in scoring this year with 32 goals and 7 assists in 15 games while Siena's Bryan Neufeld (Virgil) has 40 goals and 25 assists in 17 games. As such, both players will draw the toughest long poles as their dance partners in this game. Notwithstanding some impressive wins by Siena this year, this game should be a bit of a cake walk for Syracuse.

Cornell vs. Hartford – There are eight Canadians on the Cornell roster and four on the Hartford roster. As the #2 seed, Cornell enters this game as the heavy favorite. That said, Coach Peter Lawrence has done a masterful job of building a tournament caliber team in Hartford and has his players believing that anything is possible. Cornell freshman coach Ben Deluca is also coaching with the poise and intelligence of a journeyman NCAA coach and thus the respective game plans of each team will be interesting to watch. The highest profile Canadian for Cornell on Saturday will undoubtedly be Jason Noble (Orangeville), the sophomore defender with 64 ground balls and 27 caused turnovers this year. He will almost certainly be given the job of covering Hartford's Carter Bender (Caledon) who has scored 33 goals and 18 assists in 16 games. Other Canadians who should be prominent in this first round match-up include Cornell's Mitch McMichael (Port Perry) and Hartford's Aiden Genik (Toronto Beaches). On paper, Cornell should win easily but "you just got to love the way the Hawks are playing right now"!

Johns Hopkins vs. Hofstra – There are two Canadians on the Johns Hopkins roster and four on the Hofstra roster. Eight weeks ago this would have been an intriguing match-up and at that time some might even have been prepared to wager that Hofstra could knock off Hopkins – but a lot has changed in eight weeks. This JHU team is young, smart and quick and they have been gaining momentum all season long while Hofstra has stumbled against strong but not stellar teams and are lucky to even be invited to the dance. Never mind, they are here and Jay Card (Caledon) and Jaime Lincoln (St Catharines), who have combined for 57 goals and 25 assists will need to bring their “A” game. On the other side of center is a potent JHU offence that includes sophomore Zach Palmer (Oshawa) who leads JHU in scoring with 21 goals and 23 assists in 14 games. Based on momentum, this should be a fairly easy JHU win – however, if Jay “Fighter Pilot” Card is on, it could be a different story.

Notre Dame vs. Penn – There are no Canadians playing on either team. Expect Notre Dame to win but only break it open in the 4th quarter against this tenacious Penn team. Throughout this game, nobody will say “aboot” or finish their sentences by saying “eh” or claim they missed the net because they have a “hook” in their stick. A pity!

Duke vs. Delaware – There is one Canadian playing for Duke and three Canadians on the Delaware roster. This match-up is a fascinating one because both teams have been quite inconsistent this year and there has been plenty of tinkering with the line-up throughout the course of the season. That said, Duke’s five losses have all come against ranked opponents and they have earned several quality wins. Delaware has lost six games this year and its wins against ranked opponents have come mainly within their conference. Nick Diachenko (Courtice), who has scored 17 goals for the Blue Hens this year should see some playing time as part of the second attack unit while Jesse Fehr (Calgary), who has scored 10 goals this year for Duke may see some playing time if he is healthy.

Denver vs. Villanova – There are four Canucks on the Denver roster and none playing with Villanova. This will be the first NCAA lacrosse “tournament” game played in the Mile High City and that fact alone makes Denver a huge favorite. However, home field advantage is not given, it is earned and Coach Tierney has got the Pioneers on a roll (one might even say pick and roll) with an offence that is a little bit Princeton sprinkled with a dash of Oshawa, Halton Hills and Orangeville. Junior Mark Matthews (Oshawa) leads the Pioneers in scoring with 41 goals and 21 assists in 15 games and he will be the focal point of the Denver offence on Saturday. However, Cam Flint (Georgetown) has scored 22 goals this year and tends to score in bunches while Jeremy Noble (Orangeville) can play on both sides of center as evidenced by his 9 goals and 66 ground balls. Villanova is a superb team but the altitude and home field advantage favor Denver.

Virginia vs. Bucknell – Virginia and Bucknell could not have carved more different paths towards the NCAA Tournament. Virginia started strong but has been plagued with internal issues that saw one of its star players suspended from the team and also resulted in the team losing significant momentum in the second half of the season. Bucknell on the other hand has quietly knocked off every team in the Patriot League and added other high quality wins over Villanova, Hartford, and Penn State to end the regular season with 14 wins. There is one Canadian playing for Bucknell (Owen Bennett/Sudbury) and three Canadians playing for Virginia with Mark Cockerton (Oshawa) expected to play with the second attack unit for Virginia while Garrett Ince (Oakville) should see some playing time as a FOGO.

North Carolina vs. Maryland – North Carolina was expected to contend for a National Championship this year but has struggled at times against the top teams. However, like Notre Dame last year, North Carolina is capable of getting hot at just the right time. Maryland on the other hand has had a great

season for the most part with arguably only one bad game – that being an 11-6 loss to, guess who? – North Carolina. The question of course is whether that was a “one off” or does NC have Maryland’s number? My sense is that it’s the former and I expect this game will be won by Maryland by a single goal. There are no Canadians on either team this year but both NC and Maryland have high impact Canucks coming in next year.

Division II Men’s – Give them Bread and Circuses

Only 4 teams make the Division II final but this will change in 2013 when the NCAA expands the playoff format to 8 teams. In the meantime, there are two semi-final games and they both should be outstanding. For Canadian’s who are relatively unfamiliar with Division II lacrosse, it is worth noting that some of the highest impact players to enter the NLL over the past few years, namely Stephen LeBlanc and Kyle Rubisch came out of Division II lacrosse. This year’s Division II rosters are similarly stocked with high-impact Canucks, several of which will be prominent in the Division II play-offs.

Limestone vs. Adelphi – There are no Canadians on the Adelphi roster but there are 12 Canadians on the Limestone roster and these include standouts Shayne Jackson (Bowmanville) and Riley Lowen (Burnaby). Jackson was the only Division II player to make it onto the prestigious Men’s 2011 Tewaarton Nominee list, while Lowen has scored 54 goals so far this year in 16 games with a 55% shooting percentage. In a recent interview in lacrosse magazine, the Canadian centric Limestone offence was described as “an on-the-fly, high-powered, box centric, risk-taking attack spearheaded by Lowen and Jackson that (coach) Clarke has dubbed, most affectionately “The Circus”. Besides Jackson and Lowen, Jackson Decker (Port Moody), Mike Power (Whitby), Tor Reinholdt (Port Moody) and Tyler Baker (Peterborough) should see plenty of playing time in this game. Adelphi on the other hand is composed of players who come almost exclusively from Long Island and it owns one of the best defensive records in Division II lacrosse. In 17 games played, Adelphi has allowed its opponents to score 10 or more goals on only two occasions and goalie Eric Janssen is considered by many to be the top goalie in Division II lacrosse. This should be an amazing game that contrasts an extremely gifted offensive team with an equally gifted defensive team!!!

C.W. Post vs. Mercyhurst – With Division II only having 4 play-off spots there is often a controversy as to which team is left out in the #5 spot and last year Mercyhurst had to swallow that bitter pill. However, this year they are in an (and Le Moyne is arguably the team with the axe to grind). Mercyhurst enters this game on a five game winning streak and with only 2 losses this year but one of those losses was a 4-3 defeat at the hands of C.W. Post. Both teams are extremely well coached and have stingy defenses so the coaching adjustments following the previous game will be interesting to see. C.W. Post has no Canadians on its roster but is easily the better offensive team. However, Mercyhurst is still pretty strong in that area with Kyle Kallay (Orangeville) leading that charge with 33 goals in 14 games. Other Canadians that should be prominent in the game include Mitch McAvoy (Sherwood Park), Brady Heseltine (Elora), Zac Reid (St Catharines) and Cam McLean (Victoria). Expect this game to be low scoring but not as low scoring as the first game.

Division III Men – This Could Be RIT’s Year

Cortland vs. winner of Stevens/Montclair State - Although Cortland State is not as highly ranked as they were in past years this team still possesses a ton of talent. Neil Hopps (Akwesasne) has scored 13 goals and 15 assists in 17 games and if Cortland is to advance, Hopps must continue to shine. Cortland is

superbly well coached and draws the bulk of its players from upstate New York – nobody should look beyond Cortland.

Ohio Wesleyan vs. Denison – Ohio Wesleyan is a bit of a long shot against Denison but if A.J. Pellis (Edmonton), who has scored 18 goals in 13 games so far this year has a say, it isn't going to be as easy for Denison as some might think. However, if they do win they get to play RIT, the only undefeated team in Men's NCAA Lacrosse in any division. There will be no easy games for Ohio Wesleyan in the 2011 Tournament.

RIT vs. winner of Ohio Wesleyan vs. Denison – RIT is loaded with talent, a point that can be quickly explained by reference to their undefeated record. To be undefeated is no small feat anywhere in college lacrosse but to be undefeated in the Empire 8 Conference is simply amazing. There are seven Canadians on RIT but two players stand out. M.J Kiekebelt (Caledon) might very well be the best LSM in Division III lacrosse and Jordan MacIntosh (Oakville) can play anywhere with anyone as evidenced by his 36 goals, 26 assists, 74 ground balls, 16 caused turnovers and 91 face-off wins – evidently he also cooks breakfast for the team on road trips as well. This appears to be RIT's year but they need to win 4 games first.

Adrian vs. Wittenberg – Adrian has had a great season, going 15-2 but it has one of the weakest schedules in NCAA Div III lacrosse. The team has only lost 2 games so far this year but one of them was to Wittenberg 16 to 9. Expect T.J. Cook (Caledon) who has scored 38 goals this year and Tyler Tanguay (Pt. Colborne) who has scored 35 to be prominent on offence while Brandon MacDonald (Midhurst) dominates the midfield at LSM.

Roanoke vs. Colorado College – Roanoke could be one of the surprise teams in the tournament this year and boasts two high profile Canadians on their roster. Up front, Richard Lachlan (Port Coquitlam) has scored 44 goals and 9 assists in 17 games for second place in team scoring while Troy Grogan (Palgrave) is having a great season on defense with 23 ground balls and 13 caused turnovers in 16 games. Roanoke should be able to get by Colorado College but thereafter the competition is stiff.

NCAA Women – It's up to Limestone and Adrian

The number of Canadian Women playing in the NCAA is much smaller than the Men but growing quickly. That said, only two teams with Canadians prominent in their line-up have qualified for the play-offs. These two teams are Limestone and Adrian.

Limestone vs. winner of Lock Haven vs. West Chester – Limestone is currently ranked #3 in the nation but given that only 6 teams make the Women's Division II play-offs there are no easy games. Limestone features three Canadians on their roster, all of whom should see significant playing time in the playoffs. Freshman attack Sarah Oor (Uxbridge) is the goal scorer of the trio with 25 goals and 27 assists in 18 games. Melissa Nakasuji (Ajax) is the defender, having grabbed 20 ground balls and 10 caused turnovers in 18 games while Jessica Tessman (Whitby) who also plays defense should see some playing time.

Adrian vs. Gettysburg – The Adrian Women's lacrosse team suffer from the same issue as the men's team. That is, they beat virtually everyone in their conference but they play in a weak conference. Adrian will be in tough in their first game against Gettysburg which is also playing at home. Now that said, if there ever was going to be an upset this would be the game as Adrian features a couple of Canadian lacrosse players that can really put the ball in the net. Rachel Johnston (St Catharines) has

scored 86 goals in 20 games this year while Olivia Duncan (Orangeville) has scored 39 goals in 18 games. At the other end of the field, Hannah Early (Shelburne) has been stellar on defense with 26 ground balls and 13 caused turnovers in 20 games.

Games upcoming

There are several NCAA games that will be played close to the Canadian border this weekend upcoming. In Division I these include Hartford at Cornell this Saturday night and Siena at Syracuse on Sunday night. In Division III, RIT will host either Ohio Wesleyan or Denison on Saturday.

Final Thoughts

Most kids from Canada don't start out in life dreaming about playing lacrosse for Johns Hopkins or Syracuse. A more likely scenario was that their first sporting hero was a hockey player or team. But then one day they saw someone, perhaps an older brother or sister, fiddling with a lacrosse stick and they somehow got up the gumption to say "could I have a try"? And from there the game slowly wrapped its wings around them and carried them to places that neither they nor anyone else could have imagined twenty years ago. And the most beautiful part about the journey wasn't the lacrosse, which of course was amazing. The greatest part of the journey was the people, who taught them not just how to make a pass or shoot on a goalie but more importantly what it meant to be a player of "character". And thus, the NCAA Lacrosse Championships are far more than simply an event to handout trophies. In the end it is something far more special – it is a wonderful showcase of all that is good and decent about our sport and the way our players have been taught to play it. Godspeed to all of the players, coaches and staff who play our game.