

After memorable season, Comets head home for summer saying team ultimately underachieved

By: Spencer Davidson
May 26, 2022

UTICA, N.Y. - The dust has settled from the shocking Game 5 defeat to the Rochester Americans, which cut the Utica Comets season short at the Adirondack Bank Center in the first round. However, that doesn't take the sting away from how it ended.

The Comets began the ninth season in franchise history - their first under the new affiliation with the New Jersey Devils - by setting an AHL record with 13 straight wins out of the gates.

Utica was one of the top teams in the league throughout the regular season, finishing at 43-20-8-1, tied for third in the league with the Springfield Thunderbirds in wins, and fourth in the league overall with a points percentage of 0.660 in 72 games played.

The team won the North Division regular season title, and finished with the best record in the Eastern Conference.

However, after being bounced by the late-blooming Rochester Americans, who were red hot coming into the playoffs, they are now left wondering what could have been.

"A lot of great memories came out of the last eight months here," said head coach Kevin Dineen. "We felt that at the end there, we underachieved and felt like we should still be playing hockey right now.

"But, it's sports and your opponents always have a say. We ran into a tough one in Rochester, and you learn and move forward."

Dineen, who signed a three-year contract with the New Jersey Devils to coach the Utica Comets, said he wants - and fully expects - to be back at The Aud next season, and that plans for the 2022-23 campaign will begin right away.

"I love coming to work here every day, and to be part of this organization, and I speak on behalf of all of our staff working here in Utica," he said. "I think there's a good rapport between management and hockey operations here.

"The game plan is to keep in touch with the players over the summer, and make strides to keep building on the foundation that we put in place this season."

Despite the season ending abruptly, Dineen emphasized that he felt the team improved and grew over the course of the year - both as a whole, and as individual young players.

Dineen said that many will be back, and he is looking forward to picking up where they left off. As for those that won't, he looks forward to following their career paths, whether it be up in New Jersey with the Devils or in another organization.

According to the bench boss, a primary focus next season will be to improve the team's defense, making sure that all five skaters on the ice commit to playing cohesively and consistently in their own zone.

This year was Dineen's first experience coaching with the defensive style that the Devils organization has implemented. He said that learning this new structure helped him add more to his repertoire, making him a better coach, and that he would like to continue to improve upon that as a team.

As for the bitter feeling the team had while leaving the locker room for the final time, he wants that to be used as added motivation for next year.

"We feel like there was (sic) a lot of good things that did go on here," Dineen said. "At the end of it, the whole goal is to win the Calder Cup, to win the Stanley Cup - organizationally to have that success. [The Devils] organization has seen that before, and that's what you strive to get to."

With all of the adjustments that come with entering a new organization, the thing that Dineen said made his first year in the organization so enjoyable from the start was the fanbase that packed The Aud each and every night.

"I had heard stories, and this is not an exaggeration," he said. "To play in front of our knowledgeable fan base here, and to have the atmosphere that we had at our home games was just such an enjoyable part of the job, and the part that, for me, you don't take for granted."

So the ninth year of Utica Comets hockey - and first under affiliation with the New Jersey Devils - has come to a close.

It was a fun ride from the start, but ended sooner than the team, or its fans, would have hoped. Now, we all get ready to do it all again for year ten in October.

See you then.

Published at:

https://www.wktv.com/sports/comets-head-home-for-summer-after-memorable-season-feeling-te-am-ultimately-underachieved/article_fa7bd614-dcb0-11ec-86f8-e7260e3c165f.html

New-look Comets prepare to drop puck on tenth season this weekend

By: Spencer Davidson

Oct 14, 2022

UTICA, N.Y. - The Utica Comets are less than 48 hours away from puck drop on the 2022-23 regular season, and Friday, the team practiced for the final time at the Adirondack Bank Center before Saturday's opener.

Utica opens its tenth season in existence, on the road, in Hershey, PA against the Bears, Saturday.

Following practice, Friday, the Comets assigned forward Garrett Van Whye to the ECHL's Adirondack Thunder to start the season, giving them 23 players on the opening night roster.

Ryan Schmelzer will wear the "C" on his jersey for the second straight year, remaining captain of the team. On Thursday, head coach Kevin Dineen announced defensemen Tyler Wotherspoon and Robbie Russo as the alternate captains who will wear the "A's."

Last year's goaltending duo of Akira Schmid and Nico Daws will return to the Comets goal, likely rotating as they did much of last year. Dineen confirmed that Schmid will get the start in Saturday's season opener and that they will "go from there."

This year's team will have a bit of a different look as their main sources of offensive production have moved on - either by making the New Jersey Devils' opening night roster, or through free agency in the offseason. That leaves the Comets entering this year with a slightly different game plan, but one they say they're confident will be effective.

"We feel like our defense[men] are going to be more involved in our offensive side of the game," said Dineen. "There's some real dynamic play that comes from our points.

"[If] you look at the guys we had last year between [Alexander] Holtz, [Fabian] Zetterlund, A.J. Greer and Chase De Leo, that's a lot of goals missing. So, instead of pointing out one individual, we feel that it's going to be a lot of offensive production by committee. We feel we have four lines that can all score, that can contribute on that side."

Joining the Comets' defensive core at the start of the year is 18-year-old prospect, Simon Nemec. However, it's no guarantee he will remain in Utica for the whole season.

Nemec was the second overall pick in the 2022 NHL Draft by the Devils, out of Slovakia, and will make his highly anticipated North American professional debut with the Comets.

Though he is new to the pro game on this side of the world, he did play parts of the last three seasons in the top pro league in his native Slovakia for HK Nitra.

Now, he will look to continue to develop his game while adjusting to the North American style of play, which is played in a smaller rink and tends to be a bit more physical than the European style.

"I came to Utica yesterday - I think it's fun here, and I really like to be here," said Nemeč after his first practice with the Comets. "I try to develop myself like I know [I need to]. I need to understand our system and defensive zone coverage, play around the boards, maybe the physical game.

"I still need to improve everything in my game. I don't feel pressure on myself. I want to play a lot right now and that's all."

The Comets will look to replicate the success they saw last year throughout the regular season, where they went 43-20-8-1, winning the North Division regular season title before being bounced in the North Division semifinals in five games by the Rochester Americans.

The season gets underway at 7 p.m., on Saturday, in Hershey.

The Comets then return to Utica for the home opener on Monday, October 17, against the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins.

Published at:

https://www.wktv.com/sports/new-look-comets-prepare-to-drop-puck-on-tenth-season-this-weekend/article_ec97b8fe-4b7a-11ed-9b54-af7745ba20a1.html

Herkimer College's Aragon shares fond memories of Pelé highlighting Brazilian legend's impact here at home

By: Spencer Davidson

Dec 30, 2022

WKTV - The sports world, and beyond, mourns the loss of an icon with the news of Brazilian soccer legend, Pelé's, death at age 82 in Sao Paolo on Thursday, after a more than year-long battle with colon cancer.

Through his efforts - both on and off the field - the three-time World Cup champion became beloved on the global scale, and has remained an inspiration for soccer fans of every generation, including those too young to have watched him during his playing career.

His superstardom during his time on the field reached a level never seen before for a soccer player in the United States, and his world-wide influence could be felt right here in the Mohawk Valley.

Pepe Aragon, the current Herkimer College head men's soccer coach, and a Herkimer alum himself, idolized Pelé as a young soccer fan.

Aragon told NEWSChannel 2 that Pelé brought the world together - both through his play on the field at the international stage, and his kindness demonstrated off the field with his approachable nature, and his involvement with many humanitarian efforts.

When Aragon was a freshman playing for Herkimer in 1990, he was named a National Soccer Coaches Association of America (NSCAA) All-American. Upon arrival at the NSCAA banquet in Cincinnati, Ohio, he found out that Pelé would be the special guest of honor, handing out the awards to the 500 All-Americans that converged for the celebration.

Aragon recalled the moment of finally meeting his idol, and how the genuine generosity of the renowned athlete has had a lifelong effect on him as a fan, player, coach, and person.

"For me to shake Pelé's hand was unbelievable," he said. "He saw me. He didn't look past me, he looked me in the eyes, said 'congratulations' and shook my hand. That impacts you not just for a day. That impacts you for a lifetime.

"I'm 52 years old right now and I still remember it like it was yesterday, that's how much he touched me with it. It helps shape you as a person to see somebody that famous and that successful be that humble, and care about people."

The Herkimer Generals bench boss recalled Pelé doing the same exact thing for all student-athletes in attendance, smiling graciously the entire time.

"I can't tell you what that meant to all 500 of us," Aragon said. "He knew that meant the world to all of us. He's just a class act to do something like that."

Pelé is the only male player boasting three World Cup titles on his resume, as he led Brazil to the top in 1958, 1962, and 1970.

He accumulated 12 World Cup goals - making him sixth all-time - and he remains Brazil's all-time leading goal scorer with 77 goals in international play, coming in 92 caps with the national team.

Regarded as "the greatest" player of all time by FIFA, the governing body of international soccer, and named FIFA's Player of the Century for the 1900s, Pelé's 1,279 goals in 1,363 games between club and country (including friendlies) is recognized as a Guinness World Record.

After playing in 636 matches for Santos in his native country, Pelé arrived in the United States in 1975, where he would appear in 64 contests over three seasons for the New York Cosmos, of the North American Soccer League, between 1975-77.

It was then that his influence on the popularity of the sport in North America truly began.

"He wanted badly for the United States to pick up soccer and to become big into professional soccer," Aragon said. "That was a big goal of his, he loved it over here. He was just an ambassador in our country for the game of soccer, so every one of us idolized him."

Aragon added that he believes Pelé continues to inspire and impact the sport of soccer in the United States to this day.

Following the legend's playing days, he remained an ambassador to the game, and led many humanitarian efforts with multiple organizations such as UNESCO and the United Nations.

He even became involved in politics to promote togetherness through sport, serving as the Minister of Sports for Brazil from 1995-98.

While Aragon, a multiple national title winning coach for Herkimer, has many fond memories of watching the Brazilian legend play - including his heroics in the World Cup - perhaps none stick with him more than watching his final match in the U.S., live, and in-person.

"When I first saw Pelé, it was October 1, 1977," he said. "My dad took me to the game, and I'll never forget it. It was a sold-out crowd of like 77,000 people at Giants Stadium, and it was cool because he played for both teams. He played one half for the New York Cosmos, the team he played for in the U.S., and then he played for Santos, the team he played for in Brazil prior to coming to the U.S. It was really cool to see.

"It was an exhibition game and I can't remember which half he played for who, but at the end of the game, I'll never forget, they took him off the field on their shoulders and carried him around. It was just a magical experience.

"Imagine that, 77,000 people there and they are all there to see Pelé. That'll tell you what an icon he is. That's what he was."

Published at:

https://www.wktv.com/sports/herkimer-colleges-aragon-shares-fond-memories-of-pel-highlighting-brazilian-legends-impact-here-at-home/article_4b154b6e-880f-11ed-b407-9fe77b1367db.html

Baseball Hall of Fame Class of 2020 members prepare for long-awaited induction ceremony

By: Spencer Davidson

Sept 2, 2021

WKTV - It's a day that the three living members of the Baseball Hall of Fame's Class of 2020 have waited more than a year for, but the wait is nearly over.

The four-man class is set to be enshrined during the induction ceremony on Wednesday, Sept. 8, at the Clark Sports Center in Cooperstown.

Former New York Yankees captain Derek Jeter, former Utica Blue Sox outfielder Larry Walker, Ted Simmons, and the late Marvin Miller were all due to be honored last year until induction weekend was canceled amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"There were so many things going on in the world [last] year so I really didn't think about it much early on," said Jeter, a 14-time all-star and five-time world series champion. "I was getting excited for it and then it was canceled and then your mind goes in other places. So, I am looking forward to getting up there next week. It's been a long time coming."

Jeter is the 57th first ballot hall of famer in baseball history. He received 396 of 397 votes cast by the Baseball Writers Association of America, which is 99.7% of the vote.

That's the highest percentage of votes cast behind his former Yankees teammate Mariano Rivera, who became the first unanimous hall of famer in Hall history in 2019.

Previously, Jeter said that he isn't focused on the one vote he didn't get, but rather the 396 that he did.

He was in Cooperstown in July 2019 to celebrate his good friend Rivera's historic induction, and said he is looking forward going back to spend time at the museum on Main St., which he hasn't done in years. He also said that is looking forward to rubbing elbows with the current members of baseball's highest fraternity.

As for how Jeter wants to be remembered in the baseball world as a player...

"I want to be remembered as a Yankee, that's it," he said. "That was the only team I ever wanted to play for since as far back as I can remember. So that's what I wanted my legacy to be. Baseball has been a big part of my life and it will continue to be. I think that any time you talk about legacy post-playing career, I'm still working on it, but during my career it was just to be a Yankee."

Former Montreal Expos and Colorado Rockies outfielder Larry Walker got in with 76.6% of the vote in his tenth and final year on the ballot.

He's going into the Hall as a Rockie, the first to do so. He's also the second Canadian to be enshrined along with Fergie Jenkins.

Despite this, he still has a hard time believing that he is about to join this highly exclusive club.

"I take everything in my life as a just an average guy," Walker said. "I don't put myself on a pedestal – and never have in anything – and I don't recall any time in my career where I could actually look in the mirror or sit there and think of myself as a Hall of Famer."

A five-time all-star, three-time batting title champion, and seven-time gold glove winner, Walker began his professional career with the Utica Blue Sox, then of the New York-Penn League in 1985.

He hit .223 with two home runs in 62 games during that time before moving on within the Expos organization.

Speaking with media on Thursday, Walker recalled a memory from his time in Utica.

"I stayed in a house with five other guys, and I remember I got stuck to the basement," he said. "There were a couple of nights when the rains fell so much that water leaked and would be dripping onto my bed. It was just like 'wow, this is my first year in professional baseball' and I didn't mind it one bit. I thought it was all great and I got to meet a lot of nice people.

"I have nothing but good things there. I wish I could've played a little better, but it was a good start for me into my career with Utica."

Simmons played 21 years in the bigs, the first 13 of which were with the St. Louis Cardinals.

A switch-hitting catcher, Simmons retired in 1988 with a career .285 batting average, 483 doubles, 248 home runs and 1,389 RBI.

Getting in through a veterans committee vote, Simmons said that his excitement for the event has made the wait tough, but that it's worth it.

"The wait has been good and bad," he said. "Bad in that you've had to wait an extra year for this thing to kind of come to a head, but good in that it's extended an additional year,"

"It's like nothing's really going away. So you walk in and you think you're kind of going to turn around and walk out. And it's been a real pleasure to have walked in and been able to stay really twice as long in the room, but next week I'll finally get in."

Miller will be inducted posthumously following his death in 2012. He was a baseball executive who served as the Executive Director of the MLB Players' Association from 1966 to 1982.

The four members of the Baseball Hall of Fame Class of 2020 will be enshrined on Sept. 8 at 1:30 p.m. on the grounds of Clark Sports Center in Cooperstown.

Tickets for lawn seating are free, and the induction ceremony will be broadcast live on MLB Network.

For more information, visit baseballhall.org.

Published at:

https://www.wktv.com/archive/baseball-hall-of-fame-class-of-2020-members-prepare-for-long-awaited-induction-ceremony/article_18a86a57-8d97-5d03-95b9-cfb0265ddb01.html

Comets reflect on "mixed bag" 2022-23 season as team disperses for summer

By: Spencer Davidson
May 11, 2023

UTICA, N.Y. - The Utica Comets completed the 2022-23 season, the tenth in the organization's history, with a Game 4 loss to the Toronto Marlies in the best-of-five North Division Semifinals, last Friday. That ended a year that was a roller-coaster campaign from start to finish.

During the regular season, Utica went 35-27-6-4, finishing fourth in the North Division while struggling to find consistency in their game, and a true rhythm throughout the year.

The lights went out during the team's home opener on October 17 against the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins, causing the game to be suspended and eventually completed at a later date on January 24th. When it did resume, the Comets came away with a 5-1 win, which was a microcosm for their year. Even a win came with hurdles to get through.

It was a season best described as a "mixed bag" by head coach Kevin Dineen, as there were many peaks to go along with the valleys. It was a very resilient group, one with a strong leadership core and young players who seemed to take strides throughout the season.

Even when trailing late, you could never count Utica out of a game, as evidenced by multiple comeback wins in the playoffs alone. This included Game 2 of the North Division First Round against the Laval Rocket, where the Comets tied the game with two seconds remaining in regulation before winning in overtime to clinch the best-of-three series victory. Games like that gave Utica fans a lot to cheer about, and became instant classics that will be remembered for years to come.

"At the end of the day you'd like to still be playing and we feel almost to a player and a coach that that was a distinct possibility," Dineen said. "Toronto didn't agree and they were the ones that went out and made the difference on the ice. We really have a solid veteran leadership base, guys that have been around a little bit.

"One area that we are excited about moving forward is the progression of our guys on and off the ice as far as maturity and understanding what it takes to be a real consummate pro. So that's a good step."

Goaltender Akira Schmid, in just his second professional campaign is perhaps the best example of young players quickly learning how to be a pro. The 22-year-old split time between the Comets and parent club New Jersey Devils during the regular season, eventually bursting onto the scene as a bonafide NHL goalie during the Devils' first round playoff series against the New York Rangers.

Players like Schmid, and defenseman Kevin Bahl, who spent almost the entire year as a regular in the New Jersey line-up, with a brief return to Utica after playing here last year, show that the development process organizationally is working.

However, despite fulfilling its role in helping to move the future of the Devils in the right direction, the Comets coaching staff and front office understand that the passionate fan base here in Utica wants success at this level as well. The Comets haven't been beyond what equals the North Division Semifinals since the Calder Cup Finals run in the 2014-15 campaign.

"It starts with the passion of the hockey community," Dineen said. "You look at how many rinks we have within 15 miles: you have Hamilton College, the rink in Clinton, obviously the Nexus Center, and Whitesboro. You can keep going - New Hartford's got a rink - and it's really amazing for an area this size to have the number of sheets of ice available

"The quality of our fan base, they're passionate about hockey. They've grown up with it and they love to come and support us, the universities - both the men's and the women's teams. It's just a great place to play."

Dineen still has one year remaining on his contract with the Devils to coach the Comets, and barring any new developments, is planning on returning to the Utica bench next fall.

Speaking with media, Wednesday, before heading down to Newark along with the eight Comets players recalled to New Jersey to serve as black aces with the big club, Dineen addressed feeling as though there is unfinished business here.

He said that preparations for next year are already underway with initial roster evaluations to see how they can improve the organization's AHL roster to give the fans in Utica a year to remember.

"The investment is there from the New Jersey Devils to put a really good team in your American [Hockey] League city and that's not always the template for every NHL team to follow," Dineen said. "You take that, and you take the leadership of [Comets President] Robert Esche and his passion for the game and the Comets, and we feel like we'd like to take the folks here for a little bit of a run next spring."

Sign us up.

Published at:

https://www.wktv.com/sports/comets-reflect-on-mixed-bag-2022-23-season-as-team-disperses-f-or-summer/article_9089a8f2-efc0-11ed-a18a-2322eaaec0aa.html

Section III girls gymnastics team honored at State Capitol after capturing third consecutive team all-around state championship in March

By: Spencer Davidson
Apr 29, 2023

ALBANY, N.Y. - The Section III girls gymnastics team was honored at the New York State Capitol Building, Friday, after capturing its third straight NYSPHSAA team state championship back in March.

The team was recognized on the Senate and Assembly floors, with introductions from Senator Joseph Griffo and Assemblywoman Marianne Buttenschon, who then presented them with a resolution acknowledging their accomplishment.

The Section III girls finished first at the NYPSHSAA Girls Gymnastics Championships at Kenmore West High School in Buffalo on March 4, with a team score of 184.450, .5 points better than Section VI in second.

"We are very excited to have our amazing athletes recognized for their State Championship title." Whitesboro/Oriskany Coach, Kelly Smith said, "Gymnastics is not always the most popular sport, so we appreciate the opportunity to be acknowledged. These girls train hard year-round and we are so proud of them all."

"Congratulations to the Section III Girls Gymnastics Team on capturing their third consecutive state championship." Sen. Griffo said, "These student athletes, as well as their coaches, have demonstrated exceptional hard work, dedication and commitment to their sport and have made their families, schools, communities and the region very proud of what they have accomplished."

"The Section III Girls Gymnastics Team has clearly contributed to this spirit of excellence which is a tradition of their schools," Assemblywoman Marianne Buttenschon said. "I want to thank each and every member and their coaches for their dedication to the sport."

There are twelve members on the Section III girls gymnastics team, who join forces from New Hartford, Sauquoit Valley, Whitesboro, New York Mills, Jamesville-Dewitt, and Oriskany schools.

The team is made up of: Payton Smith, Jayla Jordan, Gabriella Dietz, Julia Makuszak, Aubrey Hughes, Karley Hughes, Kiara Khiamdavanh, Lilyana Wehrle, Grayson Gall, Madison Scranton, Antonette Sakellariou and Katie DiStefano. They are coached by Kelly Smith, Danielle Cerminaro and Tracy Fishkin.

In addition to the team title, Gall, a freshman at New Hartford, also won individual state championships in the balance beam and uneven bars events.

Published at:

https://www.wktv.com/sports/section-iii-girls-gymnastics-team-honored-at-state-capitol-after-capturing-third-consecutive-team-all/article_241ba188-e648-11ed-8759-eb5ce6d302e1.html