

Red Raiders continue Cinderella run with sectional title

By Sam Feeley

NORTH BILLERICA – Not many teams can say they've made the kind of turnaround the Lowell Red Raiders boys' hockey team has, especially in such a short amount of time.

But after winning five games the previous two years with as many as 10 middle schoolers on the roster, the Red Raiders are now MIAA Division 3 North sectional champions after a 4-1 victory over the Latin Academy Dragons Sunday night at the Chelmsford Forum.

The game got off to a fast start, to say the least, as Brendan DeMarco took the opening faceoff, bounced the puck off the linesman and a couple of Dragon players, and roofed it past goalie Brendan Mannion to give the Red Raiders a 1-0 lead just nine seconds into the game.

"It's huge, especially in games like this, to score that first goal," Lowell head coach Brian Akashian said. "You don't want to be chasing the score, and to be up one, that gives you a little breathing room."

The teams continued to play at a high tempo the rest of the first period, but neither Mannion (26 saves) nor Lowell goalie Patrick Cote (38 saves) let anything through until 13:07, when the top line of DeMarco, Thomas Hassett and Ben Asselin, executed a beautiful set play off a faceoff in the left circle to give Asselin the eventual game-winning goal from along the left wall.

The Red Raiders opened the second period at 2:26 by scoring in a much scrappier way than the first two goals. With bodies colliding everywhere in the Latin Academy zone and lots of traffic clogging the passing lanes, DeMarco reached out with his stick to prevent the puck from going over the blue line, then fed Hassett, who earlier in the game was face down on the ice for a couple of minutes after taking a big hit, for a snipe from the top of the left circle to make it 3-0.

"That first line was immense for us," Akashian said. "They scored all four goals... they're really good players and they played well tonight."

The Dragons (15-3-5) finally got on the scoreboard at 13:20 of the second period as Ryan Lonergan, who had previously left the ice after a big hit himself, played tic-tac-toe with linemates John Connolly and Nolan Rooney to beat Cote to cut the deficit to 3-1.

The Red Raiders (15-9) entered the third period with a two-goal lead, often described as "the most dangerous lead in hockey." And it certainly looked like the Dragons would cut into that lead further, as they outshot the Red Raiders 10-1 to begin the period and fired five shots on goal in the first 45 seconds of an early-period power play.

But two crucial clears by the Red Raiders snuffed out what ended up being the last real Dragon threat, and with 1:20 left, Asselin flipped the puck into an empty net to begin the hard-earned celebration.

"[Latin Academy] won the Boston City League championship two weeks ago, they were down three goals with three minutes left and they came back and won the game," Akashian said. "We knew they were just going to keep coming and coming and coming, and we did a great job of just riding it out those last 10 minutes."

For as young a team as the Red Raiders are, with their three top scorers being two sophomores and a freshman, they have shown a tremendous amount of poise through this tournament run.

“They’ve just played a lot of hockey together,” Akashian said. “When they were in squirts, they won a state championship together, and it’s a lot of the same kids. They’ve played together a lot, and they know how to play in big situations.”

The Red Raiders will face South sectional champion Old Rochester/Fairhaven in a Division 3 state semifinal Wednesday night at 7:30 p.m. at Bright Arena at Harvard University.

“It’s great for the program,” Akashian said of the win. “We had our captains from the last two years here, and I said they were just as big a part of this as anybody else... it’s good to get us back on the map and hopefully we can keep it going.”