

Sports

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Hughes drives Pelham to surprising success

Pelicans sectional runners-up despite heavy losses to graduation

By Leslie Feffer
Sports Correspondent

After losing nine players to graduation, Pelham Memorial High School field hockey coach Sue Hughes needed to boost the morale and confidence of her 1996 squad when practice began this fall.

"I lost my entire midfield, which is pretty tough because that is where the plays all evolve from," Hughes said at the time. "I have a new midfield of former junior varsity players and they're just not seasoned yet. It's a lot faster at the varsity level and they will have to make decisions quicker. It should be an eye-opener for them, but I think they'll do well."

Did they ever!

Coming off a banner 1995 season of 16-1-3 and the Section 1 Class C championship, the young Pelicans quickly attuned to the varsity level and opened a lot of eyes with an 11-2-5 record, including a 1-0 loss to Pleasantville in the C sectional title showdown match.

In 18 years of coaching at Pelham, Hughes always has strived for winning seasons — she's only had one losing campaign. She has had many strong teams in the past, but pointed to 1996 as a building year.

"We were in the state semifinals last year and we lost in the 1994 sectionals by one goal," she said. "There is a strong nucleus and the girls are working very hard."

And very successfully. Defense was the hallmark, allowing but 11 goals and recording nine shut-outs. Only two teams scored more than one goal in a match against the Pelicans, who scored a total of 31 goals.

When practice kicked off in late August, the players met twice daily, working on skills in the morning and using match conditions at night. There were no practices on weekends during the regular season, as Hughes believed in the importance of the players' enjoying their free time.

"Coach really cares about the

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team and stresses team unity," junior Mary Kate Dolan said.

Other players concurred, noting that Hughes fostered teamwork both on and off the field. They also liked her practice of trying to play everyone in every game. They did not all get equal time, but the coach made certain each player who came to practice and worked hard got the chance to be on the field.

Hughes coaches field hockey in the fall and girls lacrosse in the spring. Although many of the girls play both sports, she has discovered she has to take a different approach to each.

"I find that the fall is an easier time to coach because the kids are fresh and very committed," she said. "Everything is new, so they are really into it. In the spring, I have to be more creative because they are into different things. They have a lot of activities that they are involved in and I have to somehow work around that."

Hughes motivates her players by taking them to an indoor tournament at the University of Scranton (Pa.).

"It's a weekend tournament that increased their skills," she said. "It is something they look forward to doing and college coaches get to look at them."

Next March, she plans to take both the varsity and junior varsity teams to Scranton.

Hughes also believes Pelham benefits from being a "futures site." The U.S. Field Hockey Association started an Olympic development program six years ago, looking to become more competitive on the international level. A set program was designed that everybody follows, similar to an elite camp. Hughes is one of the coaches and uses her high school, meeting once a month between January and June.

"Since we're a site, our kids are involved and it's been so very, very helpful," she said.



"Coach knows everything, all the little things. She is so precise and she knows what people are going to do before they do it."

— Marie Uzzo,
Pelham co-captain,
on coach Sue Hughes

Before the season opened, twins Marie Uzzo and Michelle Uzzo, the co-captains, were up-beat.

"Coach knows everything, all the little things," Marie Uzzo pointed out. "She is so precise and she knows what people are going to do before they do it."

In turn, the coach believed in her team.

"I always like to be optimistic," she said. "The kids will surprise you and I think they have the ability to do well."

That collective ability of the Pelicans enabled her optimism to ring true and the team to become perhaps the biggest surprise of the field hockey season.