



Turning the tide

The secret behind CNU Hockey's success

Bre Dorrian, News Editor

In the 2023-2024 season, the Christopher Newport University club hockey team lost 15 of the 16 games they played in. This season, the team has won 11 of the 13 games they have played as of Feb. 3, with more games scheduled to finish off the season.

The newfound success of the team can be accredited to the addition of a new head coach, Kyle Pettoni (KP). In the previous season, the team practiced and competed without a coach.

The former head coach reportedly attended the first two games of last season before ultimately “giving up” on the team altogether. The players stated that he allegedly “took the money [they] were willing to pay him” and stopped showing up altogether.

Senior Daniel Simons, a defenseman on the team, said the change in coaching has been a drastic change in not only the team's performance, but the overall dynamic as well.

“Coach KP has stepped up and given me a figure to rally behind. Without a coach last year it became hard to find ways to get better and work for the success of the team,” he said. “Now, it's been easy to play and win with the boys.”

Although this is Coach Pettoni's first season with CNU, he spent his past three seasons serving as the Assistant Coach to the Villanova D1 Men's Hockey team.

A majority of Coach Pettoni's life has centered around hockey.

“My dad had me on skates as soon as I could walk, and the sport has been a cornerstone of my life ever since,” he said.

He has played hockey at the AA and AAA levels, Prep School level, Juniors level and high level club hockey.

“These experiences not only shaped my skills on the ice, but also fostered my growth as a leader,” he said. “I credit my development to the support of incredible teammates and coaches who inspired and challenged me throughout my playing career.”

As an assistant coach at Villanova for three years, Coach Pettoni worked under two head coaches with very different teaching styles, to which he accredits for shaping his own personal philosophy when it comes to coaching. For the CNU team, Coach Pettoni says he has “blended the best of both styles” and works to add in drills that resonated with him during his time on the



Players on the CNU Club Ice Hockey team. Photo taken by Katelyn Marie (@ThePhillyKat on Instagram).

ice.

"It's a combination of creativity, discipline and adaptability tailored to what works best for the team," he said.

Before moving to the Virginia Beach area to support his fiancée as she pursues her Doctorate in Audiology, Coach Pettoni began researching college hockey programs to continue his own career as a coach. After reaching out to offer assistance in the upcoming season, he was offered the position as head coach.

"This is my first head coaching role, and I couldn't be more grateful for the opportunity to grow with this program," he said.

Although his time at CNU thus far has been short, the impact he's made on the players has become starkly evident.

"It's been a full 180," Simons said. "Coach KP is a hero, and we've become almost a hive mind working as one to perform under his systems."

Senior and Forward Zach Adra shared similar sentiments to his teammate, stating that Coach Pettoni "is very welcoming and took the time to get to know us on and off the ice, it's just way more involved than [the old coach] was."

From almost no structure to complete unity, the team has been completely revitalized. According to Coach Pettoni, this season's practices have been structured around balance, skill development and team systems. Monday's practices focus around fast-paced, skill-intensive drills to "keep the players sharp." Whereas Thursday's focus around systems, meaning covering face-off strategies, special teams and positional play. Thursday's practices, Coach Pettoni said, also remain light to help keep the team fresh for typical Friday games.

"I also make it a point to end every practice with a fun, competitive game that reinforces what we've practiced and keeps the energy high," Coach Pettoni said.

Although the team has grown in a multitude of ways, not just limited to their physical capabilities on the ice, Coach Pettoni claims that the most remarkable thing he has seen with the team is its overall unity.

"There aren't any cliques; the players genuinely support and challenge one another to grow individually and as a team," he said. "They strike a great balance between having fun together and staying focused on their goals. Watching this camaraderie develop has been one of the most rewarding aspects of coaching this season."

Coach Pettoni stated that the biggest challenge the team experienced at the start of the new season was receiving penalties. He said it seemed the team was harboring frustrations from the previous year, to which he has worked to mitigate.

"I've emphasized discipline and character, and the players have responded incredibly well," he said.

The team has gone from averaging roughly a third of the game in the penalty box to just two or three penalties per game, which has only improved as the season has progressed.

"This turnaround shows their commitment to improvement and to playing smarter hockey," Coach Pettoni said.

On Nov. 8, the team skated their way to a 3-1 win against the College of William and Mary, whom they had lost to in the previous season. Coach Pettoni stated that during the duration of that game, including many others, the team has grown in finding a "new level of grit and determination" in each player.

"It was the first time this season I saw the team play a full 60 minutes of disciplined, hard-fought hockey. They minimized penalties, supported each other and left everything on the ice," he said. "Seeing their smiles in the locker room after the game, knowing they had earned that win as a team, was an incredible moment as a coach."

The team is currently striving to win in the playoffs and qualify for nationals. However, despite the physical accomplishments, Coach Pettoni prides himself in his efforts to make each player a more well rounded individual on and off the ice.

"Beyond wins and losses, I want the players to enjoy every moment on the ice – whether it's practice or a game," he said. "It's also important to me to help them build character and work ethic that will serve them well beyond hockey. These qualities can drive their success in academics, careers and life in general."

