



'YOU HAVE TO RECRUIT DIFFERENTLY NOW'

By Patrick Donnelly

NILS WALLSTROM was a standout as a freshman goaltender at American International last season. Nils Wallstrom won't play at American International as a sophomore this season.

After going 19-12-2 with a .920 save percentage and a 2.27 goals-against average in 33 appearances with AIC, the 6-foot-3 Swede opted to enter the transfer portal, eventually committing to Merrimack in Hockey East.

It's a story that feels commonplace in college hockey with quality players at smaller programs, whether it be at AIC, fellow schools in Atlantic Hockey America or elsewhere.

Take Carter Wilkie as another example.

The rising senior led RIT to its first NCAA tournament appearance in eight seasons after winning the Atlantic Hockey tournament in 2023-24. After back-to-back point-per-

game campaigns, Wilkie entered the portal, where he opted for North Dakota in the NCHC for 2024-25. Former RIT goaltender Tommy Scarfone transferred to Wisconsin in the Big Ten for his senior season after earning AHA Goalie of the Year.

"It's like if an FCS or lower-end football school finds a good running back," said one Division 1 assistant coach, a former assistant in Atlantic Hockey who wished to speak anonymously.

"Say Western Kentucky finds a running back that runs for 2,000 yards. They're probably going to get scooped up by an ACC school."

In 2021, the NCAA stopped requiring players to sit out a year if they transfer schools one time. Beginning in the spring of 2024, it granted immediate eligibility to athletes following subsequent transfers.

Under the new legislation, movement around college hockey has been rampant during the past three offseasons. In 2023 alone, 291 men's Division 1 players entered the portal, according to the Grand Forks Herald's database. Of those, 74.2 percent trans-

The transfer portal's impact on Atlantic Hockey is undeniable. Continuing to raise the bar is the key, coaches insist.



Jack Ricketts captained the Holy Cross Crusaders last season but will skate one final NCAA season with Quinnipiac in ECAC Hockey.

ferred to a new Division 1 program, 9.6 percent went to Division 3 and 4.8 percent turned professional. Among the rest, just 2.4 percent remained with their current team.

High-profile transfers such as Wallstrom, Wilkie, Scarfone and others have led to a perception, from the outside looking in, that conferences like Atlantic Hockey have become feeding grounds for larger programs or simply stepping stones for younger players to prove themselves before heading elsewhere.

“At the end of the day, players have certain career aspirations,” the anonymous coach said. “Like, a Drew Bavaro left Bentley to go to Notre Dame because someone told him if he wants to sign an NHL contract someday, he needs to be in a different league.”

Bavaro, who signed with the Boston Bruins as an undrafted free agent this past spring, was a productive defenseman at Bentley before transferring to Notre Dame in 2022.

It’s an attitude that doesn’t exactly ring true to those on the inside of AHA.

“We don’t operate that way here at Holy Cross. Maybe other schools operate that way or feel that way, but we don’t,” said Castan Sommer (Shrewsbury, Mass.), the associate head coach

at Holy Cross, where he’s spent the past three seasons as an assistant. “We’ve done a pretty good job of getting our guys to stay. I think it’s kind of an outside-looking-in type of perception.”

The numbers back up Sommer’s sentiment.

Since 2019, among AHA schools based in New England, AIC saw the most transfers with 42.8 percent of their recruits heading elsewhere. At Sacred Heart, 35 percent transferred, while 27.3 percent left Holy Cross and 21.1 percent left Bentley.

“I think a lot of it is opportunity for these kids,” Sommer said. “For goalies, only one guy can play the net. Goalies got to go where they’re going to get the opportunity to own the net, and it’s the same for ‘D.’ You got to go where you’re going to get top-four minutes. If you’re a forward, you got to go where you’ll get top-six minutes. Sometimes guys are top-six guys, but they’re competing with guys who are first-round NHL draft picks, and sometimes you can get a little buried. It doesn’t mean they’re bad players.

“There’s only so much opportunity to go around. If you can find guys that fit into those roles, then they’re probably going to shine for you.”

It’s important to note, however, that AIC and Holy Cross do not offer graduate academic programs. Some of their transfers were seniors looking to take advantage of their graduate eligibility and COVID fifth years. That was especially true for Holy Cross, which had seven players enter the transfer portal this offseason, six of whom were seniors. In 2023, four of their six players to enter the transfer portal were seniors.

Compare those transfer rates to some of the bigger programs in Hockey East and the ECAC, and you’ll find similar trends.

At Boston College, 29.1 percent of their recruits since 2019 transferred elsewhere, and 20.8 percent left BU. Northeastern had 28.6 percent enter the portal. Providence and Merrimack were among schools to see over 40 percent transfer. UMass, UConn and Maine each had over 30 percent enter the portal. The same goes for Quinnipiac at 35.3 percent.

The movement has added another layer to recruiting.

“I try to spend more time not dwelling on how it was because it’s the way it is now. It becomes the new norm, and you have to change the dynamics by which you recruit,” said Sacred Heart senior associate head coach Scott McDougall, who has been with the program since 2009. “The old days of guys matriculating out the door so you know what you’re losing that year are long gone. You have to recruit differently now.

“If you take time feeling sorry for yourself for losing a guy here or there along the way, you’re going to hurt your program in the long run. These players have options. They have choices now, and I don’t believe there’s, at least in our program, ill will for a player deciding to do what’s best for them, if they believe there’s a better path in their career. That’s the world we live in now. I say this to recruits all the time. My job is to recruit the best players that want to play hockey at Sacred Heart.”

While Atlantic Hockey programs have lost key players to the portal, they’ve also reaped the benefits of adding impact transfers.

Liam McLinskey was a top 10 finalist for the Hobey Baker last season after posting 47 points (19 goals) in 39 games at Holy Cross. He transferred from Quinnipiac in 2022. Sacred Heart brought Mikey Adamson in from UMass in 2023. He exploded for 20 points in 34 games on defense after just two in 11 the season prior.

“The limelight tends to be on the players leaving and less on the players coming in because you don’t see that information as readily as you do when kids go into the transfer portal,” Mc-

Dougall said. “Listen, we’re going to lose players, but we’re going to add some great ones into our league as well. I don’t know if we’re any different from other leagues in the sense of who we’re losing. We just may be losing them for a different reason.”

SHU played the long game with Adamson, a player it recruited heavily before he initially committed to UMass.

“We’re thinking of that at all times. We’re fostering relationships during the initial recruiting time, thinking that this could be someone down the road,” McDougall said. “These kids remember that. So if they go to a place, and it’s not a great fit, they remember who recruited them. So we

spend some extra time on some guys that we may not necessarily get right away, but sometimes we can get them on the second time through, and they can really help our program.”

How does Atlantic Hockey change the way outsiders view the league?

“I think the league as a whole, we need to continue to challenge ourselves and play other leagues, and you have to win those games if you don’t want that type of perception,” Sommer said. “You need to go out there and prove it. We did well in Hockey East last year, and I’ll tell you

that helps in recruiting. It helps with perception to have that on your résumé.

“I don’t think there’s anything we can do besides go out there and win those non-conference games. You’ve got to put your money where your mouth is.”

Holy Cross went 3-1-1 in Hockey East last season, sweeping UConn, tying UMass Lowell and losing to Merrimack in overtime. RIT did well out of conference, too, beating Notre Dame and splitting with UNH. AIC went 2-1-0 in Hockey East and split a series with Penn State in the Big Ten.

AHA teams have upset top seeds in the NCAA tournament over the past decade. RIT knocked off No. 1 Minnesota State in the first round in 2015. Air Force did the same to Western Michigan in 2017 and again to top-seeded St. Cloud State in 2018. AIC shocked No. 1 St. Cloud State in 2019.

“I think there’s a perception of Atlantic Hockey that’s false and probably a little outdated,” the anonymous coach said. “People can continue to take the league lightly and then get upset when they lose games to them. In any league in college hockey, on any given night, anyone can win. There are a lot of good players out there, and that includes Atlantic Hockey.” ■



UMass transfer Mikey Adamson contributed 20 points for Sacred Heart last season.

McLinskey

By Joshua Kummins

ATLANTIC HOCKEY AMERICA debuts for the 2024-25 season, having joined forces with sister conference College Hockey America to form a united men’s and women’s league for the first time in its history.

The 11-member men’s conference had competed as Atlantic Hockey since its founding in 2003 when nine original members broke away from the all-sports Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference.

Here are five storylines for the upcoming season:

“McLinskey Magic” is back

Ever since Holy Cross’ **Liam McLinskey**, a Pearl River, N.Y., native, turned up the scoring heat during a run to the final game of the 2023 Atlantic Hockey Championship, he hasn’t turned it down.

Can the third time be the championship charm? McLinskey and the rest of fourth-year coach **Bill Riga**’s (Westboro, Mass.) team sure hopes so after climbing to second place and reaching the conference semifinals a season ago.

5 ATLANTIC STORYLINES

The former Quinnipiac transfer is coming off an incredible individual season, earning Atlantic Hockey Player of the Year honors and becoming the first Hobey Baker Award top-10 finalist in program history. His 47 points tied for second in the Crusaders’ Division 1 era and led the league alongside 28 assists and a plus-23 rating.

The Crusaders will have to replace some production around McLinskey, including their next three leading scorers, but 25-point scorer **Jack Stockfish** and defenseman **Mack Oliphant** return with All-Rookie honors from the last two seasons, respectively. Former Deerfield standout **Thomas Gale** leads the team’s returning goalies.

Falcons aim to keep flying

Bentley enters the second season of the **Andy Jones** era looking to build upon a sixth-place finish in the league race, though a first-round upset by 11th-seeded Robert Morris ended its postseason aspirations abruptly last March.

Incredibly, the Falcons return their top 12 scorers from a year ago, including graduate student **Ethan Leyh**, who potted 13 goals, fellow third-team All-Atlantic Hockey honoree **Nick Bochen** on the blue line, and three rising sophomores who made immediate impacts. Defense was the name of the game, though, as senior **Connor Hasley** backstopped the league-best scoring defense with 2.29 goals allowed per game.

Jones has added promising talent as well, including UConn transfer **Jake Black** (Pomfret, Conn.) and another forward in **Artem Buzoverya** from two-time defending Division 3 national champion Hobart.

Will AIC, SHU contend again?

While Bentley’s sights are set on continuing to climb, the top five of last season’s standings also included the other two New England-based teams in the league with Sacred Heart and American International, the latter of which fell to top-seeded RIT after reaching the