



Guildford Flames are ready to blaze to Treble success

Penelope Parkin meets the ice hockey champions hoping to maintain their form this season

Top: Lifting the championship trophy
Opposite page: Top scorer Milos Melicherik is one of the original group of Slovakian recruits to join the Flames in 2003/04

THE GUILDFORD Flames hit an impressive winning streak in February when they won the English Premier Ice Hockey League title, beating 13 other teams to lift the trophy from Milton Keynes Lightning, the 2004/05 champions.

Team Captain Paul Dixon describes their success as 'a great feeling' and admits taking a particular pleasure in the achievements of younger team-mates. "This year's win was special because it was the players' first year in the league," he says. "It was a lot of fun to share it with the younger guys who'd never played in a team before in recognising

their own contributions to the trophy."

Certainly the Flames' teamwork has proved key to their success with a brilliant start to the season initiating an unbeaten 20-game winning streak, which put the team well into the lead by November. The unbeaten record created pressure for other teams to catch up and allowed the Flames room for error. It also made the difference between winning and losing, allowing them to beat Slough Jets although the Jets had matched them almost game for game from December.

Coach Stan Marple, currently entering his tenth season as the Flames



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head coach devotes most of his time to training the team. Clearly he thinks highly of the current team. "Every now and then you get a bunch of guys who care only about the team winning," he says. "When 22 or 23 guys can put aside personal agendas, it's amazing what happens to the team dynamic. It doesn't happen every year so when it does it's very special."

Fortunately the Flames didn't have many off-ice problems, despite injuries throughout January and February. Among the casualties were Paul, who broke a bone in his foot, Netminder Joe Watkins, who sustained a stomach

injury, and leading goal scorer Jozef Kohut, who tore knee ligaments and needed surgery, putting him out for the rest of the season.

Thankfully, ice hockey teams often have 20 players on the ice at any one time, so losing two or three still allows the team a fighting chance.

On top of the possibility of injury, players also have to put in a tremendous amount of hard work. Paul says: "While it can be exciting to play sport for a living, it can often be a very difficult and stressful lifestyle, not to mention the competition for a spot in the team." The stringent regime involves training from ▶

Who's who

- The Flames is made up of players from the UK, Canada and Slovakia.
- Canadian Head Coach Stan Marple represented the University of Alberta before playing in England for several professional clubs
- Marian Smrnciak appeared for Team Slovakia at the Olympics in 1994
- Jozef Kohut appears for the Slovakian national team
- Canadian stars David Oliver and Jamie McInennan were both signed to Guildford during the 04/05 NHL lockout

The Flames at a glance

- **October 1992** The Flames were founded and played in the British National League
- **1997/98** League and Playoff champion Treble winner, BNL Southern Conference
- **1998/99** BNL Benson and Hedges Plate Winners
- **2000/01** BNL Cup, League, Playoff Champion Treble winner
- **2003/04** BNL Playoff
- **End of 2004/05 season** British National League is dissolved
- **2005/06** The Flames transfer to English Premier Ice Hockey League
- **2005-2008** EPL League Champions
- **February 2006** Team wins English Premier Ice Hockey League



Above: Netminders Joe Watkins and Tom Annetts get their hands on the cup



Community teamwork

■ The Flames visit some 60 schools a year with Surrey Police to talk about how pupils can protect themselves by making sensible decisions on drugs and alcohol. The programme is more than a decade old and already 40,000 schoolchildren have met the Flames. The programme, which is now being expanded to cover the whole county, has won several awards including the High Sheriff of Surrey award in the category of substance misuse.

■ The Flames also operate a junior ice hockey programme with teams for under 10, 12, 14, 16, 19 and for ladies. Skating lessons are provided by Guildford Spectrum for children wanting to join. Contact Guildford Spectrum on 01483 443322

Tuesday to Friday, both on ice and on conditioning, with games on Saturday and Sunday.

It's understandable, then, that players don't spend much time together off the ice. With back-to-back games at weekends, most tend to wind down with a good meal and some solid sleep after the match on Saturday in time for the game the next day rather than hitting the pubs and clubs in town!

live and raise your children." Paul has lived just outside the town for more than seven years with his wife and son. He says the Flames are well supported by the local community. "It's probably a contributory factor in the players deciding to bring their families with them for the season from September to April, returning to their hometowns in the off-season," he adds.

With an eye to the future, Paul isn't

The Flames are capable of taking all three trophies

When they do get together as a team, the players like to eat out at a local restaurant. And those who are keen golfers practise at Milford Golf Club whenever they can. The younger Flames are just as likely to be swotting at home alone: Simon James and Ben Duggan, for example, are studying, Simon at the University of Kingston, Ben at Portsmouth.

Guildford is a long way from Canada and Slovakia, where some of the Flames team-mates hail from. But Paul says: "It's a very nice town and a great place to

complacent, describing each ice hockey season as 'brand new'. He admits that the team would like a chance to win the Treble, which is made up of three competitions: the English Premier league, the Premier Cup and the playoffs at the end of the season. There are a lot of good teams vying for a chance at the trophies so the Flames must take on a heavy workload if they are to improve on their success last season.

"The Flames are capable of taking all three trophies," Paul insists. Let's hope he's right!