

Bumper crops Acton-Boxborough is fruitful ground for standouts

The Boston Globe

By Mike Lipka, Globe Correspondent | October 7, 2007

ACTON - It's fall, meaning the area is ripe with apple picking and pumpkin patches, along with all the other bounties the season brings.

In Acton and Boxborough, they grow a unique product: outstanding high school athletes. No matter the sport, each autumn there seems to be an endless harvest of motivated, hard-working, talented teenagers ready to blow away the competition in one of the state's best conferences.

And no one can seem to explain it.

"I have no idea," said Acton-Boxborough field hockey coach Mae Shoemaker. "It must be in the water. There's a lot of good stuff going on here."

In the athletic department, everything works in harmony - good administrators, good coaches, motivated parents, great feeder programs, and a competitive environment, all at the second-largest school in the Dual County League. This year, the result is possibly their best season ever.

"It's the best one that I can remember," said athletic director Steve Desy, who has worked in the Acton system for 24 years. "This, right across the board with all of our sports, is one of the most successful starts to our year that we've had."

All nine fall teams were over .500 through Tuesday, and at least five have a legitimate chance to win a state title.

Two of those teams (girls' soccer and girls' swimming) are the odds-on favorites statewide in Division 1.

The three others - football, boys' soccer, and field hockey - all have had ample postseason success in recent years, and despite losing considerable talent from last year's teams, they appear headed back on the right path. In particular, the field hockey team started the year 0-1-1, but has gone unbeaten in eight games and is now 7-1-2.

"We had to get to know each other and how we play," said Giselle Schlegel, the field hockey team's leading scorer. "We had some big holes to fill, but I think we have been doing a very good job keeping up with that."

"That" is a standard that's difficult to match, created by past years' teams and the current year's classmates. And they do it all amid intense pressure from opponents, virtually all of whom circle the A-B game on their calendars.

"We're everybody's big game," football coach Bill Maver said last month. Maver's teams won 52 straight games earlier this decade, including four straight Super Bowls. "We have a big target on our back, even though we didn't win the league last year and win a Super Bowl. Everybody gets up for us, and week after week, it's tough on these kids."

The newest teams to feel the pressure? The girls' swim and volleyball teams, both of which are having breakout seasons.

A-B's swim team has a decorated history, having won eight straight state titles in the 1990s, but only took the torch back two weeks ago, when the Colonials beat eight-time defending state champ Andover, ending its 99-meet win streak.

"I would say to date for them, that was a huge win," Desy said. "But once they happen, they're behind us. We can't live on the past. We've got to be going forward."

The volleyball team has been doing just that. Coach Suzanne Hoag showed up last fall and led what had been one of A-B's weakest fall squads to a 10-10 season and its first tournament berth in a decade. This year's club has reached a new level, winning eight straight after a season-opening loss to league champ Lincoln-Sudbury.

"I'm also a phys ed teacher here, and I feel like the climate and the culture of the school are really positive when it comes to working out," said Hoag, who has taught at seven high schools in Massachusetts, but says she has never

seen a group of students as motivated.

"A-B has a reputation," Hoag said. "Everyone's doing well, so you hope it kind of spills over. But I think these girls just really want it, too."

Everyone seems to at A-B, which makes sense, considering that it's also one of the most highly regarded public schools in the state academically. Schlegel said the athletes' commitment in the classroom carries over to the playing fields, and vice versa.

"We're just a really competitive and achieving school in general," said Sonya Mukhanov, the volleyball team's setter.

"It's not just athletics here at Acton," said Desy, who also praised the improving cross-country and golf programs. "Band, theater, speech and debate - all of those groups do equally well."

But athletically, if you ask Ru Sweeney - the third-year coach of the top-ranked girls' soccer team in the state - it all starts at the top, with Desy. A former A-B softball coach, Desy took over the AD position four years ago, and Sweeney said he couldn't imagine someone doing a better job.

"His coaches - he supports them, he backs them, and he puts them in positions to be successful," said Sweeney, whose unbeaten, untied team has a staggering collection of talent. "He's just fair, really is what it is. He's just fair."

But it might be hard to be fair come tournament time, when Desy will likely need a helicopter to get to all of the Colonials' postseason games.

It's those days - "fun days," Desy called them - when A-B reaps the harvest of another bumper crop.

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