

SAC's dynamic duo swap hockey sticks for field lacrosse sticks to usher in Spring



It's been a seamless transition from Canada's national winter sport to Canada's national summer sport for Jonathan Castagna and Francesco Dell'Elce this April.

The St. Andrew's College (SAC) Seniors have put their hockey equipment in storage and switched their focus to field lacrosse for the Spring season.

The two Saints aren't alone in the move from hockey to lacrosse. Fifteen of their First Hockey teammates also play lacrosse for SAC. The varsity team is gearing up for its first home game on the turf of St. Andrew's on April 19. To prepare for the regular season, the Saints travelled to Buffalo to get in some exhibition games and came back with good results. Although the team is 'inexperienced at playing lacrosse,' according to Dell'Elce, 'we won our first game of the season in overtime before the second game of the doubleheader was rained out.'

The native of Nobleton loves playing lacrosse for the Saints because 'it's a completely different environment compared to the long hockey season, it's a bit less competitive, and most of guys from the hockey team play lacrosse, too.'

Similarly, Castagna enjoys this familiarity between teammates and believes it 'leads to a different kind of fun where the hockey players can decompress and create a kind of 'dog pound' mentality on the lacrosse pitch which is filled with grit and competition.'

While there is a fun element to playing lacrosse in the Spring for these long-time teammates, their respective hockey options this Fall have comparatively serious long-term and bountiful possibilities.

2023 marked the eleventh consecutive year that Jonathan Castagna and Francesco Dell'Elce have played on the same hockey team. From their days in tyke with the Duffield Devils for two seasons, to seven seasons with the Toronto Marlboros, to the last two seasons with the SAC Saints, Castagna and Dell'Elce have established reputations as terrific student-athletes who play hockey at an elite level.

Now, with promising pathways before each of them, they could diverge by going to Cornell and UMass, respectively. Or, they could end up playing a 12th season on the same squad?this time in the BCHL on a rebuilding team in Penticton where playing time will be up for grabs with only 5 Bees returning for 2023-24.

If the duo does not end up skating for one of British Columbia's strongest junior teams, they have two pathways that are equally desirable. For SAC Captain Castagna, his US College hockey and prospective NHL options are clearly-delineated. The SAC Scholar (Honor Roll) has committed to Cornell University for next season where he would like to study Economics. However, Castagna is also ranked #135 in the NHL's Scouting Bureau's List so it is likely that he'll be drafted in the 4rd or 5th round in June. The high-scoring centre would ?be thrilled and honored to be drafted by an NHL team.?

Similarly, for SAC Assistant Captain Dell'Elce, the steady and productive defenseman is ranked #106 in the NHL Scouting List so his draft prospects could be as high as the 3rd or 4th round. Dell'Elce stated frankly that being drafted by an NHL team would be a ?huge honor and a childhood dream come true.? However, the SAC Scholar Honor Roll athlete is also committed to the University of Massachusetts for 2024 where he would like to major in Business. He is looking forward to playing at UMass because the ?hockey culture is the same as it is here at SAC.? Prior to going to UMass, the Nobleton native will compete in the British Columbia Hockey League and play for the Penticton Bees. Dell'Elce is looking forward to ?seizing the Junior Hockey opportunity? and ?playing for a team in full rebuild.?

Whether the long-time teammates end up in Penticton together in 2023-24 or go their separate ways, both Castagna and Dell'Elce reflected on their final season at SAC.

When asked to consider their personal highlights from the Saints' 2022-23 season, Captain Castagna selected the team's bronze medal win at the 39th MacPherson Tournament because ?we were able to celebrate on the podium.?

?We were able to rally and win after a devastating overtime loss on home ice the night before. We were able to overcome adversity and beat Victory Honda.?

Assistant Captain Dell'Elce also chose the MacPherson tournament as his 2023 highlight because ?it was great to play with family and in front of family in a packed house with great atmosphere. The Pipe Band's pre-game appearance on the ice made it an amazing playing experience.?

A reflective Castagna echoed his teammate's remarks about his ?family? at SAC as the best thing he experienced: ?I'm most grateful for the family I have made here at SAC. I have lived away from my parents for two years so this school has matured me. I'll cherish these memories. I will want to give back to this community.?

Dell'Elce was equally appreciative.

?I came here for development and I am grateful for the opportunity.?

He offered an aqueous metaphor to drive home his point: ?My dad often said to me that ?You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink'. This place has all the ?water' or opportunity to draw from it.?

While it's evident that both Castagna and Dell'Elce have seized their opportunities at SAC, they acknowledged that their success on and off the ice would not have been possible without the leadership and mentorship of their Head Coach David Manning.

Dell'Elce?a four-year veteran at SAC? noted that, ?we all love Coach Manning. He's given us every opportunity and he's taught us how to play the right way and to live our lives the right way, too.? Castagna succinctly assessed Coach Manning's impact on him over his two seasons at SAC.

?Coach Manning taught us to be men, not showboats. He's not just a hockey coach; he's been a life coach and mentor for two years.?

In 2023-24, SAC's Dynamic Duo could be going their separate ways for the first time in eleven years, but they carry with them a bevy of sound values to use for their next stage of life after high school graduation.

By Jim Stewart