

## **Field hockey: Pair of late goals help Smith Academy capture 3-0 win over Mohawk Trail (PHOTOS)**

By HANNAH BEVIS, Staff Writer Published: 9/14/2023 7:22:00 PM

HATFIELD — From the very beginning of Thursday’s Valley League field hockey game between Smith Academy and Mohawk Trail, the Falcons were pushing the pace on the offensive end.

After a 6-0 defeat to East Longmeadow to open the season, Smith Academy was still looking for its first goal of the season. It didn’t take them very long to find it – with just over five minutes left in the opening quarter, Bella Gavron sent a pass that connected with Shae Moulton in front of the net, and she buried it to give the Falcons a 1-0 lead.

Though Smith Academy scored twice more in the fourth quarter, that first goal was the only one the Falcons needed. Despite a few late offensive pushes from the Warriors, the Falcons secured a 3-0 victory at Judy Strong Field for their first win of the year.

Mohawk Trail fell to 0-2 on the season ahead of a matchup against Turners Falls on Friday.

“We’re just so young and so inexperienced that we’ve been kind of all around the goal and to put it in, you felt the team really relax and settle in,” Smith Academy head coach Judy Strong. “We were able to keep up that pressure because it just helped them.”

Despite the loss, you’d never have guessed that Mohawk Trail was unhappy with the way it played after the final horn sounded. As soon as the game ended, the Warriors rushed the field cheering for their goalie, Cleo Gardner, who made a whopping 15 stops to keep the contest competitive until the very end. This is Gardner’s second year as the team’s goaltender, and she’s seen herself improve much better in net, especially when it comes to staying mentally focused.

“I felt good. I felt much stronger,” Gardner said. “(Last year) I could not separate my real life and games from each other. I got very emotional during games. And I think I’m doing a much better job thanks to my coach this year. There’s a huge improvement, especially with that.”

The Falcons (1-1) dominated the first half of the contest, controlling the pace of play and keeping the ball in Mohawk Trail’s end for the majority of the first 30 minutes. Gardner stood tall to keep the score at 1-0 going into halftime, but the momentum was crucial for the home team to keep playing strong.

Despite that, the Warriors knew that this was still anyone’s contest, and the visitors concentrated on staying hungry during their halftime huddle.

“We knew that if we stayed focused that we could score – this game wasn’t out of control, it wasn’t out of our grasp. The girls really wanted it,” Mohawk Trail head coach Jenn Pease said. “Today I just wanted to see these girls come together, which they did. We just fell apart a little bit at the end.”

Smith Academy’s last two goals came in the fourth quarter, putting the game just out of reach for the visitors. Both goals came off rebounds, and both times it was Alexa Jagodzinski who found the ball and slammed it home. Her first goal came off an assist from Cat Kokoski during a huge scrum in front of the cage two minutes into the fourth quarter, and the second was unassisted with just over five minutes left in the game.

With just 13 players on their roster, it’s not unusual for the Falcons to start losing steam in the second half of games; most of them are playing for the entirety of the contest. But on Thursday, Kokoski said her team looked strong throughout.

Strong also said that they emphasized playing smart field hockey to help make up for their small roster size and control how much energy they were exerting.

“Everyone had a lot of energy. No one really looked tired, no one really looked like they needed a sub unless they strained something or got hit with the ball,” Kokoski said. “For the most part I think everyone did a really good job of being conditioned today.”

The Warriors rushed up the field with a couple quality chances in the third quarter and shut down the handful of corners that the Falcons drew to keep the score deadlocked at 1-0 going into the final frame. Despite their improvements, they couldn’t solve Smith goalie Madison Didonna-Renner, who saved all four shots she saw.

The teams are scheduled to meet again on Oct. 3 in Buckland.

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