

Pine-Richland boys lacrosse building toward playoff run

By: [Jerin Steele](#)

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North Hills' Zachary Bruder defends on Pine-Richland's Will Albrecht on May 2 at Martorelli Stadium.

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The [Pine-Richland](#) boys lacrosse team's season has paralleled last year as far as results go.

They lost six of their first nine games, while going up against some difficult opponents inside and outside the WPIAL, but used those games as a springboard.

Starting on April 18, the Rams won six in a row and clinched a playoff spot entering a game May 4 with [Shady Side Academy](#). They won six of eight to close out last year as well after a tough start.

This time, though, they're looking to parlay their strong finish into postseason success after a first-round exit in 2022.

"It's sort of by design the way the schedule works out," [Pine-Richland](#) coach Dave Offner said. "The WPIAL predetermines when our section games are played, and for our nonsection schedule, we try to schedule the best talent possible.

"We want the best competition we can go up against to get ready for section play. I think it helps, although you need to have the right mindset for it. We've responded really well to getting beat up a bit early in the season and not losing confidence in our ability."

During the winning streak, the Rams have discovered aspects about themselves, and maybe the biggest development has been the ability to win games different ways.

A good example is a back-to-back stretch against [Butler](#) and [Norwin](#), April 26 and April 28. The Rams beat the Golden Tornado in an offensive slugfest, 19-15, then turned around two days later and won a low-scoring defensive battle, 7-4, over the Knights.

"We were battle-tested in those games," Offner said. "You could probably tell without even watching the game by the score that the offense carried us in the [Butler](#) game. Then in the [Norwin](#) game, our defense stepped up to get us a win. That's encouraging to see, because sometimes you can sense the trend where you're going to rely on your offense to put up 14 or 15 goals to win a game and then there's times where the defense can sense that they have to carry the game.

"We're getting to the point in the season where we're starting to see consistency on both sides of the ball. That's when we'll be at our best."

Offner said the team is very deep in the midfield. They can, at a minimum, use two lines of six players between attack and midfield and feel comfortable adding in a third line of midfielders as well. Cooper Zancosky, Will Hilton, Garrett Barth, Andrew Mellis and JL Aiello have led the offense consistently throughout the year.

On the defensive side, the Rams have dealt with some injuries to veterans Carter Ravotti and Ben Lyons, but Offner expects both to be back soon and ready for the playoffs. The injuries have allowed younger players like Zach



White, Brett Saulnier and Andy Forrester to step up and at the same time gain experience.

They've complimented solid goalkeeping from Justin White.

Long stick midfielder Evan Johnson and defensive midfielder Talan Hill-Ressler have had a positive impact on the defensive effort as well.

The Rams could be in position to host a first-round game again, and if they get that chance, they'll be looking to capitalize after letting last year's opportunity slip from the grasp.

"We were much younger last year, and I think our guys are learning to manage the game better," Offner said. "I've seen it develop from last year to this year and then from the first game this year up until this point. I feel like we were a little flat and a little loose going into the playoffs last year and maybe underestimated our competition.

"We knew they were a solid team, but in the back of their minds, I think they thought they had that game in the bag because we had home-field advantage and had beaten ([Penn-Trafford](#)) in the regular season. They found out quickly that wasn't the case, and it was too little too late. I don't think they'll let that same mistake happen twice."

Jerin Steele is a freelance writer

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