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White team player John Edwards, right, fights with the red team's Vinny Jowdy for the puck during the Dec. 31, 2007, alumni game.

Charles Lewis/Buffalo News

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Nolan Classic becomes much more than hockey game

New Web site deepens connections among former players, coach

By Miguel Rodriguez NIAGARA CORRESPONDENT

LEWISTON — The Dick Nolan Classic isn't just an annual hockey game featuring Bishop Duffy-Niagara Catholic ice hockey alumni anymore.

It's officially more than just a game.

In fact, it's a worldwide production. The only thing missing is a live blogger.

But that's an idea for another year, considering the Classic, named for the program's former coach, has only had its own Web site since the summer.

The seventh version of the alumni game, featuring players who laced them up for their alma mater during the latter portion of the 20th century, officially took place Saturday night in Dwyer Arena on the Niagara University campus. That's past the Niagara Weekend deadline, but anyone who couldn't attend will still be able to read all about online at DickNolanClassic.com.

Now, how many once-a-year alumni hockey games have official historical documentation? For that matter, how many once-a-year alumni hockey game Web sites resemble a photo album that'd make Facebook envious?

"It's more of a historical archive, as we like to portray it," said class of 1980 graduate and event organizer Vince McConeghy. "The audience would only be those who had the experience of playing hockey at Duffy and Niagara Catholic. The great thing about the Internet is no matter how insignificant or removed these events were, at least you have a place to put them all so that when someone wants to go back and look at things, they have a place to go back and look at things."

That means if for some reason any former alumni, family members or friends weren't able to attend Saturday's festivities, they'll at least be able to see some photos from the game — whether it's a nice save or goal, or Scott Dunn and Dave San Lorenzo taking the traditional friendly cheap shot at one of their buddies just to make sure they make the score sheet, albeit in the penalties column.

“It keeps you updated not only with the hockey team but the school [there is a link to Niagara Catholic at the site] as well,” said Nolan, who was expected to play in the game with his brother, Dan, and son, Rich. “It’s pretty cool.”

The Web site is kind of a merger of the principles of Wikipedia and Facebook, except the site looks way nicer than those others.

The Web site was the idea of McConeghy, San Lorenzo and Brian Schiavi — the trio that also organizes the catered annual game. It’s a way for past players who bonded during the ever-elusive mission of earning a win to keep in contact whenever they have a free moment from their busy lives. In addition to family photos, there’s a message board that enables them to receive status reports and even engage in some good-old fashioned ribbing.

Dean Gionis designed the Web site, while Barney Gallagher (Class of ’82) has been the official photographer for the Nolan Classic. McConeghy said without Gallagher, there wouldn’t be a Web site filled with current photos and the past photos that are available.

“[Gionis] basically loved the concept from a community standpoint,” McConeghy said. “He does Web sites for small businesses and he kind of took us . . . because he liked the project and it had some value other than some straight business opportunity.”

There also are feature stories written by McConeghy, who in addition to owning LeMetro Bistro & Bakery in Williamsville also has covered the Niagara Purple Eagles for nearly a decade for U. S. College Hockey Online.

McConeghy has a funny one regarding a cousin chiding him for trying to relive the glory days through this game.

McConeghy’s written response: “What glory days?” before going into how if it wasn’t for teammate Robert Gruarin — he likely wouldn’t have experienced the thrill of victory during his scholastic days. Gruarin, considered the best skater to ever lace ’em up for Duffy/Catholic, led the Monsignor Martin Association in goals, assists and penalty minutes in 1980.

Nolan especially likes the “Where are they now” section that provides an update on former players. He also likes the highlights of past games.

In the grand scheme of things, the Web site is the ultimate tribute to Nolan in that the main lesson their old coach taught them — there’s more to life than just winning hockey games — is ultimately the reason this Web site has come about.

The players he coached had a ball playing together, illustrated by the fact most of them still contact each other and that Niagara Falls is an annual Christmas time destination just so that they can hang with old friends and their families at the annual alumni game. By turning their respect for their old coach into a technological marvel, they’re able to keep in touch with each other a little easier.

“It’s been a way to keep everybody connected to a part of their lives,” McConeghy said.

“I think once people go to the reunion game, they’ll start talking about the Web site because there are some people who don’t know about it,” San Lorenzo said. “It seems like more and more as we’re finding people from generations past they’re coming up with yearbooks and old newspaper articles to build up the archives.”

Nolan initially thought that McConeghy and company were kidding when discussing the formation of the Dick Nolan Classic Web site.

Now that he’s seen the finished product, he’s speechless.

“What can you say when somebody does that,” Nolan said. “They’re all just a bunch of great guys. I know it sounds cliché, but it was really my honor to coach them.”