NATIONAL 16-AND-UNDER WATER POLO CHAMPIONSHIP

DON HEALY/Leader-Post

Russell Lenferna of Saskatchewan prepares to throw the ball as he is guarded by Bruce Black of Dollard des Ormeaux at the Canadian under-16 boys water polo championship at the Lawson Aquatic Centre in Regina on Friday.

'It's an exciting feeling'

Russell Lenferna has high hopes for himself in water polo

By GREG HARDER
Leader-Post

Russell Lenferna grew up idolizing local water polo luminaries like Kevin Graham and Noah Miller.

Now he's officially swimming in their wake.

"When I was really young and my brother was playing, I would go and watch the games that he played and lots of times those guys would be around the pool," Lenferna said Friday during the first day of the 16-and-under national boys water polo championship in Regina. "Watching them play, that's where I wanted to be. I wanted to be at that level. To see those guys and know this is the program that they were built from, it's an awesome opportunity.

"It would be awesome to have young guys looking up to me like I did to them."

The way Lenferna is going, that might happen sooner than later.

The 15-year-old Weyburn product has already been identified as a future prospect for the Canadian senior national team. In the process, he's following the same path as the likes of Graham, Miller, Robin Randall and Will Tunison, all of whom went from training in Regina to representing their country at elite events such as the world championships and Olympics.

"Russell is being scouted for the senior men's team in a few years," confirmed Team Saskatchewan head coach Greg Korpan. "I'm very certain he will be there. He reminds me a lot of a player I used to play with, Kevin Graham, who's probably the best player in the country by far. The physical size (of Lenferna), the way he looks and the way he plays and his game sense, the skills he has at such a young age, it's the exact same as Kevin."

Lenferna is taking another step towards fulfilling his potential this weekend at the 16-and-under championship. He recently returned from the Canadian under-18 tournament in Halifax, where he also took part in a subsequent national selection camp along with Regina product Drake Greschner. Both players are representing Saskatchewan this weekend and are expected to continue their training in the summer as part of the centralized Canadian program in Montreal.

"(The camp) was an eye-opener to what can come from water polo," noted Greschner. "If you put all your effort into it, you can go far."

Lenferna and Greschner are proof of that, continuing a rich tradition that was built on the accomplishments of players such as Miller and Graham.

"As a coach it tells you that what you're doing is right," said Korpan. "I remember when I was playing, I looked up to Kevin Graham, players like that. The younger players (now), kids that are under eight, under 10, under 12, they look up to (the current 16-and-under stars). They see that these guys are playing for the national team. They're playing for their country. What's stopping those younger guys from having that opportunity if they work for it?"

Lenferna's sentiments exactly.

"To be able to take the game to the national level and play for Canada, that's what I want to do," he said.

"It started this season when I kind of got recognized and went to an ID camp and from there it was like, 'This is something I really want to go for, something I want to do.' It's an excellent feeling, a surge of adrenaline. It definitely drives me to work harder at practices and at games. It's motivation every moment (because) I've got a commitment to live up to."

Team Sask opened the national 16-and-under championship on Friday with a 15-3 victory over DDO 2 (Dollard-des-Ormeaux, Que.) at the Lawson Acquatic Centre. Lenferna led the host squad with five goals. Ethan Davis (four), Eric Graham (three), Cole Hinzmann (two) and Tait Daku (one) had the other markers while Greschner picked up the victory in net.

Saskatchewan is back in action today (11:45 a.m., Lawson) against the defending-champion Ottawa Titans. The playoff round begins this afternoon and concludes Monday.