

What happened to the Lakers?

By GORD SMILEY
Daily News Sports

A lot of people have been asking me lately what's happened to the Vernon Lakers.

It's common fact by now, since I've written it so many times, that the past two years Lakers were overwhelming doormats in the B.C. Junior Hockey League's Interior Division.

But my how things have changed! Now when someone asks me about the Lakers, my response is quick and to the point. Lakers are one of the top, if not the top, team in the Interior.

This might come as quite a surprise to some people since Lakers are an unusually small junior hockey club, in size and weight.

However, Vernon has proven games are not won on muscle alone. Lakers possess the best skating team in the Interior, if not the entire league, and concentrate on position rather than taking the body.

SECOND PLACE

Lakers currently occupy second place with a 13-9 record, six points behind Penticton Knights with a 16-5 mark. Lakers will start slipping in the standings since they're enjoying a 12-day layoff, but by the

time they get back, they should have plenty of games-in-hand, plus a healthy lineup.

There are several reasons for Lakers turnaround from a year ago. First, the presence of Coach Murray Lawrence has given the team much-needed discipline. Lawrence also has confidence in his players and the players have confidence in him.

Secondly, Kamloops Oilers of the Western Hockey League have bolstered Lakers' lineup, even though the teams are only operating with an unofficial working agreement. It has to be an unofficial agreement since the BCJHL has forbidden its teams to affiliate with tier one clubs.

Thirdly, the front office is 100 per cent more stable with one owner, Ray (Dick) Williment, then last year when 10 people owned the club.

LOCAL LINE

Lakers also have a strong line of local players led by centre Nick Kapicki, with Kevin Thorlakson on the right side and Greg Kowal on the left.

Kapicki was expected to be, and is, the team's top penalty killer, but is also fourth in team scoring with nine goals and 16 assists for 25

points. Thorlakson has contributed nine points while Kowal has seven. The amount of havoc this line creates around enemy goaltenders is a pleasure to watch for Lakers' supporters.

Also a major part of the Lakers rise to the top is the defensive duo of Mike Enemark and Gavin Shuya, easily the best defensive pairing in the BCJHL.

TOP SCORER

Then there's Rob Kossan who leads the Interior Division with 36 points coupled with the standout goaltending of Rex Grant, Matt Sekela and Shawn Oswald.

Lakers have put together a good solid lineup, a lineup of hockey players as opposed to the beef Penticton has assembled.

An Interior title for Lakers? Hard to say, they've split with Penticton this year, but the constant pounding Knights administer could take its toll on a club.

The one thing about Lakers is they never disappoint the fans. Constant hustle, always giving 100 per cent, injured or not. Because of the year's version of the team, junior hockey has been saved in Vernon.

I don't think the media, or the fans, could have lived through another 23-game winless streak!



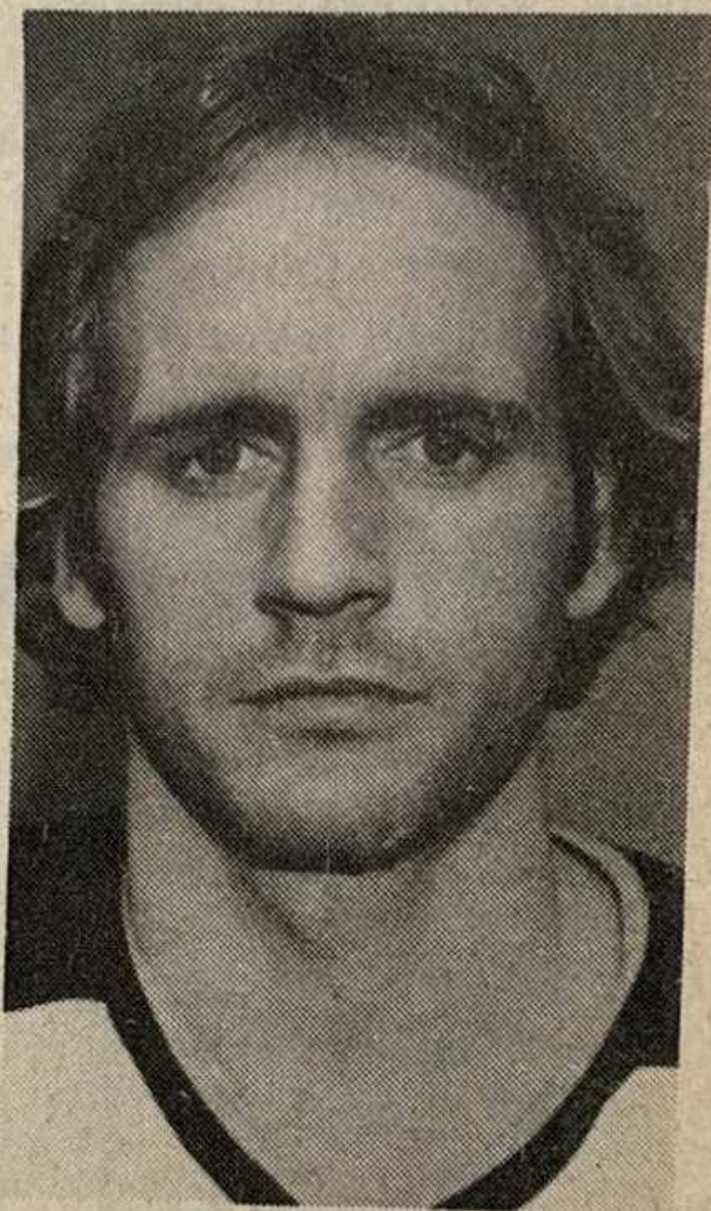
Gare named assistant coach

Ernie Gare has been named assistant coach of the Vernon Coca-Cola Juvenile Reps.

Head Coach Ernie Kowal told the Daily News he is excited about having Gare involved with his club. "Ernie is a great guy and I'm sure he'll do a great job with the kids," Kowal said.

Gare, 30, helped Vernon Essos win the B.C. Junior Hockey League title in 1971-72. He later starred with Spokane Jets and Trail Smoke Eaters, of the Western International Hockey League. Last year he helped Vernon Cougars reach the B.C. intermediate championship, where they lost to Quesnel Kangaroos.

Kowal said, "I think it is great to see one of the guys who played junior hockey here come back to help out at the minor level."



ERNIE GARE
... with juveniles

Vernon has a 6-2 won-lost record in Okanagan-Mainline Juvenile League play. Next game for the local squad is Saturday, in Kelowna.