

Chris Saunders deserves better



By JIM JUDD
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Even as the general public of Vernon are reading this, Lakers' Junior A Hockey Club are bestowing their yearly honors upon young players in their organization.

Unfortunately, unless my guess is wrong, one player is going to miss the armful of praise he deserves from his team-mates, coaches and management alike.

Vernon native Chris Saunders is the player in mind for this heap of well-deserved attention. While the team is still in the process of lamenting having been recently ousted from playoff contention, Saunders probably wishes he had had the opportunity to try.

It was another season that wasn't for the soft-spoken Vernon Minor Hockey product, the second straight campaign in which he has spent the better part of the season watching from the sidelines instead of playing.

NATURAL TALENT

While Saunders was blessed with an incredible amount of natural athletic talent he was also cursed with an equal dosage of plain old bad luck. In fact, if it wasn't for bad luck, Saunders would probably wonder if he had any luck at all.

Saunders first came to light during the BCJHL Interior Division playoffs in the early spring of 1983, stepping out of the ranks of the Vernon midget reps into the Lakers' lineup. Called up from midgets to fill the holes left by injury to the local junior squad that season, Saunders made the transition from midget to junior so easily and with such confidence that it was virtually impossible to tell who was the rookie on the Lakers' blueline and who the veterans were.

His fluid skating style, great lateral movement, and tremendous puck control gave the local club an added dimension on defence they never knew possible. Saunders was the perfect complement to a talent-laden defensive corps that season which included Gavin Shuya and Mike Enemark as one pair of blueliners, along with Ken MacKenzie and Rudy Poeschok making up the other duo. As the fifth wheel in that lineup Saunders allowed then coach Murray Lawrence to shuffle the bunch at random and throw out any two with the confidence of knowing that even if his regulars got into trouble, Saunders was always in the right position to avoid a compromising situation.

OUTSTANDING PLAYOFF

With an outstanding playoff season under his belt, Saunders checked into Lakers' camp last season confident and ready to assume a role as a regular on the blueline. Complying with his obvious ability, coach Chuck Tapp and then Mike Enemark made full use of

Saunders' talents.

Then the trouble began for the young Vernon player. Just a dozen games into the regular season Saunders suffered a serious concussion following a heavy check into the boards in his own end. After sitting out a few games to recuperate, the injury re-occured, leaving Saunders with a slow-healing contusion and advice from Lakers' team physician that he was to remain off the playing roster indefinitely. Indefinitely escalated into the entire season, the big defenceman never saw another game situation during the 1983-84 campaign.

Last fall Saunders once again checked into Lakers' camp, again confident of his ability and fully recovered over the summer. He was ready to make up for his lost year and with his high school education already complete was also prepared to play his best in a bid for a college scholarship.

INJURY BUG

Even during training camp, however, the injury bug struck Saunders. A freak accident in pre-season left him with a badly broken wrist and during the first six weeks of the regular season he was once again on the sidelines.

A rare occasion in which to see Saunders in action was missed by local fans when the team travelled to the coast for a four-game series. Saunders turned in an outstanding performance both offensively and most especially defensively during those four games and helped the club to earn two victories in four starts on the coast . . . the best road record of any Interior club last season on the coastal swing.

Immediately upon returning, Saunders fractured his other wrist during a game situation. Again, the injury was the result of a late check but with Saunders they are all late checks since he refuses to throw the puck away unless he can make a play with it.

He never played another game during the current season.

TEAM SPIRIT

But, through both campaigns, even knowing that he wouldn't step onto the ice for another game, Saunders maintained his team spirit. He continued to skate and practice with the club. He kept boring team statistics from the broadcast booth during every home game and most of the road games. His support for his team-mates never once faltered.

His ability, coupled with his conduct, his support for his team and, above all, his attitude and sportsmanship, epitomizes the ideal junior player.

Naturally, little, if any, mention will be directed toward Saunders when the team awards are presented. However, with any luck he'll be back next fall and, spirits willing, he'll put in a full campaign.

But keep your fingers crossed for luck.