

Tough test for Knights

Penticton Knights will represent the BCJHL at the Centennial Cup Championship this week in Orillia, Ont.

It is only the second time in the league history that one of its teams will go to the national championship. Abbotsford Flyers went to the title round in 1983, but lost four straight games to North York Rangers.

Knights will enter a four-team round-robin play beginning May 4. The other teams include the host team from Orillia, also champions of the Ontario Junior Hockey League.

Penticton advanced to the national finals on the strength of a highly convincing 9-3 victory over Estevan Bruins, Saturday night, which gave the Peace City squad a sweep of their best-of-seven Western Canada final series.

Knights' Coach Rick Kozuback feels his team will be entering the Centennial Cup series with a strong possibility for success.

"We're optimistic about our chances but it's difficult to know how you'll start up until you play," Kozuback said. "But, in a one-game shot, we are capable of exploding out of the starting gate."

Knights have quite a number of things going for them, not the least of which is goaltending. Blessed with an unbeatable duo in Derek Pizzey and Grant McPhail, Kozuback has been able to use both backstoppers with equal success in playoffs.

"We've been splitting the goaltending duties between them," explained Kozuback. "Each of them has been outstanding in net."

Another big plus factor for Knights is their specialty teams which have spelled defeat for most of the clubs they've met since advancing beyond the BCJHL.

"Our power-play has been a key for us," said Kozuback. "Our penalty-killing has really been effective. We've been catching a lot of teams flat."

In 26 playoff games, Knights have scored an incredible 25 short-handed goals, including two Saturday night, which put the final nails in the coffin for Bruins. Among the leaders for Knights in this department are centres Todd Brost and John Depourcq.

In 26 playoff games, Knights have lost just four times, with three of those to Burnaby Bluehawks who challenged Knights for BCJHL supremacy.

"Burnaby is the best team we've played yet, no doubt about that," Kozuback said. "The difference between their team and the others we've played has been goaltending . . . the other teams just haven't had good goaltending."

Knights have taken time to prepare themselves for the teams they'll face.

"We've kept in close contact throughout the year on the Ontario League so we know a fair amount about Orillia and Aurora," Kozuback explained. "We also have an edge in one way because Orillia has been waiting two weeks since its last series."

Kozuback feels Orillia, which went to the national final in 1984, will be the top competitor next week while Aurora, which earned a backdoor berth into the National final, and Cole Harbour, Nova Scotia, which traditionally hasn't produced strong contenders, won't be as tough.

Knights leave Thursday morning for Aurora, but won't play their first game until Sunday against Aurora. Penticton plays Monday against Cole Harbour, takes Tuesday off, and meets Orillia Wednesday. The top two teams advance to the final May 11.