

Raw deal for Knights



By JIM JUDD
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It's often the story behind the story that often makes an event interesting to readers. The story behind Penticton Knights' 4-2 loss in the Centennial Cup championship game last Saturday in Orillia, Ont., is definitely one such case.

Although Knights' success this season is commendable and a big plus for the B.C. Junior Hockey League, it was an ironic and paradoxical twist of fate that left the club just short of achieving junior A supremacy in this country.

Here is a team that has long prided itself in being able to build solid contending hockey clubs through the lure of college scholarships. The idea, of course, was to produce a championship junior hockey team while grooming those players for the college ranks. This year Knights were packing off a record number of youngsters to the NCAA but coach Rick Kozuback hadn't figured on losing any of them before they served his purpose.

On the final day of that long and hard-fought campaign, when the junior hockey national title was on the line, Penticton found itself short one very important and key ingredient in its line-up . . . defenceman Ian Kidd.

Kidd had to watch the game from the sidelines, having turned 21 that very day (May 12) and in the process reaching junior hockey senility.

NCAA RULE

Having turned 21, Kidd was no longer eligible to play organized junior hockey lest he relinquish a full season of his college scholarship program with North Dakota University. Under the current U.S. National Collegiate Athletic Association regulations, a player loses one year of scholarship eligibility for any year in which he plays even one game of organized hockey after he turns 21.

In compliance with the regulation, Kidd bid his team-mates farewell and good luck and took up residence in the bleachers. His presence on the ice might have made the difference for Knights, who dropped a 4-2 decision to Orillia Travelways . . . an empty net tally capping the victory.

Rules may be rules, but in this case it's difficult to imagine why such a ruling was imposed by the NCAA since it

serves to protect nobody. If anything, such as a ruling should at least be open to interpretation. For instance, any player involved in post-season play after his 21st birthday should be allowed to complete his season with the hockey club which developed him. In Kidd's case, after three full seasons with the Knights, Penticton is definitely the team responsible for his development as a player and obviously responsible for making him the calibre of NCAA players.

DISAPPOINTED

For Kidd, it meant a heap of disappointment as he watched from the sidelines while his team-mates battled in a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The Centennial Cup represents a fitting end to a long and illustrious junior A hockey career and to have it taken away from a player on the point of a technicality is wrong.

Kozuback supported Kidd's decision to uphold the NCAA ruling, but knowing Kozuback like I do, it wouldn't be too difficult to imagine what was going through his head at the time.

Like Kidd and the rest of the team, an opportunity to play for a national hockey title might only come a coach's way once in his lifetime. To compound matters, Kozuback had dismissed most of his regular season defensive corps while still battling within the BCJHL. Kidd was one of the few regular defencemen still on the roster while Kozuback had moved three defensive-minded forwards back to the blueline to add speed at that position. The gamble had obviously worked, but with Kidd out of the line-up, it meant his quarterback on the power-play was missing.

NO FAVOR

The bottom line for Kozuback is that he's done a lot of NCAA schools a big favor over the past few years in providing them with top calibre players and when it came down to the one time he needed a favor from them, he got the big middle finger salute. Luckily for Knights, none of their other 14 players currently signed to scholarship programs with NCAA teams next year fell into the same category as Kidd.

Other Penticton's hockey season might have come to an untimely end long before it did.