ASK AL

Lakers lack team leaders



by
Al Paterson

Daily News
Sports Writer

The Vernon Lakers, are struggling. They are mired in third place in Interior Division B.C. Junior Hockey League standings with a team that has the talent to be in first place.

So what's wrong? It all starts in goal and the Lakers have absolutely awful this year between the pipes. Actually, they've been awful behind their own blueline so it's unfair to lay all the blame on the goalies.

Mostly what's wrong, in my opinion, is the team is not getting the leadership it needs. Not on the ice and not behind the bench. The Lakers started the year with five 20-year-olds with the likes of Campbell Blair, Darryl Dickens, Al Young, Ed Tuckwood and the recently-departed Wes Gentles. Since the start of the year, Lakers have added to their roster a 20-year-old rearguard named Lorne Cummings.

It's the coach's job to keep the goals against down. Head coach Ernie Gare has not done that so he must take a large part of the blame for the relatively poor showing by the club to date. However, what really upsets me about this Laker team is the way they seem to accept failure. It looks to me like they subconsciously look for ways to fail. And that's where the 20-year-olds come in. It's up to the older guys to take the lead. They have to whip the club into shape in the privacy of the dressing room. Young guys look to the older players to set the tone. The only real leader I've seen so far this year is Tuckwood, although I don't like the stupid penalties he sometimes takes. But he hustles on the ice. He's a rah-rah type of guy, and it looks to me like he cares about the outcome of the games.

I have watched the Lakers go literally into the tank twice against Kelowna Packers. Twice this year I've seen the local squad squander a four-goal lead and end up wimping out of the arena at the end of a game. It seems when the going gets tough, the Lakers check out. That's a sure sign of a team that beats itself.

To be sure it wasn't just me, I phoned a few Penticton Knights to get their assessment of the Lakers. Captain John DePourq, wingers Brad Priest and Shawn Howard, all told me they would prefer to meet the Packers in the first round of the playoffs. Obviously then, the Knights feel they have a better chance of beating the Packers than they have of beating the Lakers. It's a point of view I agree with.

The Penticton players I spoke with told me they thought the Lakers problem was basically between the pipes. I haven't talked to anybody disagrees with that. The Lakers goaltending this year has been lousy. There is no nice way of putting it. It stinks.

So why is coach Gare pussyfooting around? Gas somebody, Ernie. I asked Gare why he hasn't done that so far and he told me he was trying to find a goalie, and when he found one that was better than what he had, he would be making a move. Fair enough.

Muzz MacPherson of Langley made the absolute worst trade of the year when he settled for Gentles even up for goalie Jason Palmer. Gentles is a 20-year-old who is going nowhere fast. Why Muzz would give up a promising 18-year-old for somebody like that is beyond me.

So, okay. It looks like Palmer will be the answer for Lakers. That leaves me with a question. What's wrong with Darryl Dickens? He played well last year. Is the fire all gone? I have found that talent doesn't deteriorate. But desire sometimes does. And that's what I think is wrong with the Lakers deep down. They don't have 20 guys who show up to play every night. They need 20 guys who have some pride when they pull on that jersey. And right now I can't see any evidence of that kind of pride.

Next time they play the Packers they have to decide that, come hell or high water, they are going to take the two points, regardless of the cost. And until the Lkers make up their minds to do just that, pay whatever price it takes, they have no chance to be champions.

I'm betting the Lakers will find that pride, and they will be champions this year. The talent is there, they just have to decide to get the lead out and go to work.