# Lakers show character



*by*
*Don Kendall*

Daily News
Sports Editor

After looking back at the history of the Vernon Lakers, only a fool would predict they will advance past the first round of the B.C. Junior Hockey League playoffs. Pass the dunce hat please!

Lakers have been a perennial contender in the BCJHL's Interior Division and have treated Vernon fans to some excellent hockey during the last five years. But, when playoffs begin, it is a different story.

Despite the presence of Scott King, Murray Baron, and Shawn Lafroth, who obtained college scholarships; and Dennis Holland, Troy Pohl, and Trevor Pohl, who now play with Portland Winter Hawks in the Western Hockey League; Lakers were eliminated in the opening playoff round last March by Kelowna Packers.

In the three previous seasons, Summerland Buckaroos, Penticton Knights, and Merritt Warriors took turns knocking out the Lakers in the first round of post-season play.

Those Vernon teams also featured their share of stars including Bob and Dave Wensley, Stacey Wakabayashi, Gavin Shuya, Ken McKenzie, Bruce Major, and Mike Enemark.

But, this year could be different. Lakers need just one point in their remaining six games to clinch second place and home-ice advantage in their series with Penticton.

I believe Lakers have a better team than Knights. And after spending four days with the team on a Coast trip last weekend, I believe they have the character to eliminate the defending Canadian champions.

Everyone knows about Vernon's high-powered offence. Centre Kevin Scott is a good bet to win the BCJHL scoring title, Campbell Blair has broken a handful of league records for scoring by a defenceman, and Lakers have five of the division's top nine scorers.

In goal, Jason Palmer has been playing like a 'franchise netminder.' Since acquiring Palmer from Delta Flyers, Lakers have lost only three of 23 outings. Mike Sutherland, who joined the team two weeks ago, has two years of WHL experience and gives Lakers a solid goaltending tandem.

Unlike 1985 when Merritt intimidated Lakers and subsequently knocked them out of the playoffs, nobody is going to run Vernon out of the rink this season. Lakers' General Manager Mel Lis saw, after 20 games, that his club needed some muscle. He acquired Todd Demchuk (Nanaimo); Ian Alger, Wes Elliott, and Mike Conrad (Abbotsford); and Jan Zeidel and Shawn Howard (Penticton); in four separate trades. That group, along with Ed Tuckwood and Keith Chase, allowed Vernon to stand up to Richmond Sockeyes and Nanaimo Clippers when they tried to intimidate them last weekend. Vernon doesn't have the toughest team in the BCJHL, but it is capable of playing rough-tough hockey.

The only question mark is defence. Elliott has been the best of the blue liners in recent weeks. Greg Olson, Blair, and Chase will be the other principle performers in the playoffs. Jason Fox, Chad Biafore, and Conrad will probably play lesser roles.

For Lakers to beat Penticton, Elliott, Chase, Blair, and Olson will have to play well. They hold the key to Vernon's success against Penticton.

Can Lakers beat first place Kelowna Packers? Don't even think about it until the Knights are history!