Penalty killing a problem



by Jim Judd

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November has traditionally been a good month for the Vernon Lakers . . . usually a period of time when a lot of positive things happen for the local hockey club and they put a lot of wins together.

So far this November has followed tradition rather well. In the eight games played to date this month, the team has suffered defeat but once. Albeit there are two games remaining before November ends, and one of those games is against the Kelowna Packers — a team which handed Vernon its one loss earlier this month.

Things have been going well for the Lakers lately and they are currently in the midst of a five-game winning streak — modest, but worth mentioning.

It's not likely that the wheels are going to fall off the wagon at this point but there are a few cracks in the foundation that need to be filled in if the local club has aspirations of winning the Interior Division and the B.C. Junior Hockey League.

Firstly, let me point out that goaltending isn't one of the cracks I'm speaking of, nor is the club's defensive squad at fault here either. Both Glen Fry and Barry Rysz are capable of handling any and all goaltending duties that are likely to arise this season.

They need some more help at various times during the game, however, and often they aren't getting the type of support that is needed.

For instance, looking back at the club's last four home games, all victories, and all by substantial margins, I might add, some interesting statistics show their heads.

In those four games the Lakers have outscored their opposition by a healthy margin of 38-9. This in itself leaves little need for concern, but when you take into consideration the fact that seven of those nine goals have been on power-plays, I would be concerned just a bit. That's a 78 per cent figure, in case you were wondering.

Now there is more than one way of looking at these figures. Firstly, an outsider could suggest that if the Lakers have only allowed their opposition two goals in four games while at even strength, what's the need for worry?

Okay, another way of looking at it is that on two of those occasions, a single goal meant the difference between a shutout for Fry and another goal added to his stingy total so far this season.

Obviously the club is having difficulty killing penalties with any sort of efficiency and any sort of consistency. In a game against Merritt recently, all three of the visitors' goals (7-3) came on the power-play.

Though they have reduced the number of unnecessary penalties lately, the club is still guilty of taking too many retaliation penalties, receiving too many additional penalties after the whistle goes, and in general spending too much time in the penalty box.

Their own power-play units have accounted for only about 25 per cent of the 38 goals scored in the past four games so obviously the Lakers play better at even strength against most of the other clubs in the league.

Now, some observers might think this is just so much unnecessary gum-flapping but there are things at stake in this issue. Firstly, in the late going of the season and particularly in playoffs, goals become fewer and farther between for every club and especially this team as past records have indicated. Two or three goals can easily decide the outcome of a game at that point.

Next we have the case of Fry who is looking for a chance to lead the league in goals against this season and possibly bring this club its first-ever top goaltender award.

At the time of this writing, Fry is very close to Dennis Casey's average (Casey plays for Kelowna) and if the Lakers had prevented those two goals that spoiled his shutout bids against Merritt and Summerland, he would be even with Casey.

In the heydays of the Montreal Canadiens, the club had the legendary Ken Dryden in net, but even Dryden's job was made easier by an agreement between the players and the Montreal management. They had what has been named since the "Vezina Bonus Clause" in all their contracts.

What this clause stated was that every player would receive a substantial cash bonus at the end of each season if Montreal's goaltender received the Vezina Trophy. The result, of course, was that every player played as hard on defence as he did offensively and they took as few penalties as possible in the process.

It also paid other big dividends for the team because it instilled good defensive playing habits in the club and helped them to the most remarkable season of all, 1977-78, when they lost just eight games.

Again, maybe I'm just making trouble with this way of thinking, but then maybe I'm right too. Besides, a team can never stop making improvements no matter how small.

Everyone knows it's the little things that count.