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Hard work and discipline lacking



by Jim Judd
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Mel Lis has an interesting way of analyzing the ups and downs of his hockey team and he generally doesn't pull any punches with his analysis so I've come to accept his overviews on various situations.

Take for instance the current dilemma. Outsiders may not think of a two-game lead in a best-of-seven playoff series as one at all, but in spite of the lead Lis isn't very satisfied with the performance of his club in their first two playoff dates.

Like I said, I tend to agree with Mel on a lot of points and this is certainly one that washes down easily with me too.

Here's a team that finished more than 30 points ahead of the Merritt Centennials in the regular season and yet they have just barely managed to beat their opponents in the first two games of this Interior Division semi-final series. On Wednesday night, in Merritt, the club was very fortunate to have escaped with a win after they were outshot 40-26 by a team that can neither match them physically nor in their depth of talent.

Mel isn't happy. I can't blame him.

Far-sightedness may prove to be one of the initial factors leading to the downfall of the Vernon Lakers if they don't suddenly wake up and smell the coffee. Some one had better let them know that it isn't advisable to look beyond the current series. Sure they've got the depth and ability to go a long ways but the road to hockey greatness is always marked by the graves of talent-laden teams that don't practice good hockey habits along the way.

Now there are many out there, a few players among them, who will argue that the club is missing two of its top playmakers and one of its best defensive forwards. Mike Barkley and Dallas Drake might have scored 90 goals between them but with them out of the lineup all you have left is one other 50-goal scorer, a handful of 30-plus goal-scorers and a half dozen more players who hit double figures during the season in the goal production department.

With 90 goals out of the lineup they would still have more goals this season than every other team in the Interior Division and only a few dozen less than the top two clubs in the Coastal Division.

At best the injury excuse is simply that — an excuse. If there is anything to blame for a poor showing thus far into the playoffs it's purely a lack of discipline on the team.

Mel, however, sees it differently. According to the club's amiable general manager, the Lakers just seem to play down to the weaker teams and play up to the stronger teams. Sort of like what you might call a gesture of good politics around the league.

Somehow, if this is the case, the club managed to outscore their opposition, even the weakest ones, by a 200-goal margin. But just the same, there is some truth to what Lis is insinuating because their 10 losses in the regular season were spread fairly evenly between good, bad and mediocre teams in the league.

But discipline is hurting this team now and it will continue to do so until they realize the error of their ways. Penalties are costing them goals and eventually those goals will mean the difference between winning games and losing them. Also between winning series and losing them.

Much has been written about discipline and team sports over the ages and it has almost always proven to be the foundation of successful teams. The Penticton Knights of the 1986 playoffs were a model of poised discipline. Ditto the Richmond Sockeyes of one year ago. Both times it netted those teams a national championship. Neither team had any more talent or any more depth than the current edition of the Vernon Lakers.

It may be something of an oversimplification, but offensive firepower is an outgrowth of natural talent whereas defence depends on hard work and discipline. There's not much a coach can do about talent at this point in the season but he can certainly have an effect on hard work and discipline.

So far, only a few members of the Vernon club can rightly say they have worked hard and played up to their capability. Very few of them, particularly some of the defencemen on the team, have incorporated any kind of discipline into their play.

In the regular season, when scouts are just sorting out who's who and who's doing what with the various teams, individuals can strut their stuff and put their numbers on the board. This goes for defencemen as well.

Come playoff time, their allegiance belongs with the team only. They've already done what they can for themselves but now it's time to pay your dues to the team that gave you the chance in the first place.

Every player has a position to play and a certain duty to perform in the playoffs and that is exactly what he must carry out to the best of his ability. When everyone is playing the game properly the natural goal-scorers have plenty of opportunities to do what they were intended to do.

The bottom line, however, is that discipline and defence win hockey games. Let's hope we see a lot more of both during this playoff season.