Long road for the Lakers



by Jim Judd

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By now there are more than just a few anxious players on the Vernon Lakers roster each chomping at the bit to get started on the still long road to the national championship. At the end of that road lies Junior A immortality — until next year at least. Along the way there are many battles to be fought and much ground to cover.

To start with, the local club will make a one-way journey of considerable length this week. At this point all that must be determined is exactly how long the trip will be. The direction is already certain — north. Depending on the outcome of the seventh and deciding game in the Peace-Cariboo Junior Hockey League tonight, the Lakers will make the 17-hour journey all the way to Grande Prairie, Alta. or just a nine-hour sojourn to Prince George.

At any rate, the duration of the series hardly justifies the length of the journey. A team to represent B.C. will be determined through a best-of-three series with the PCJHL winner.

There are two ways of looking at such a brief series. Firstly, it will be swift and sudden and the winner can get on to bigger and better things.

On the other hand, such a short series is hardly fair to the winner of either league, particularly the BCJHL champion who had to endure three grinding best-of-seven series just to risk the possibility of being knocked off by their northern counterparts. Somehow, the PCJHL, which has seven fewer teams than the BCJHL, has managed to extend its playoff season an additional two weeks. Considering that the PCJHL has a shorter regular season and two fewer playoff series to contend with, it's anybody's guess how they managed to stretch it out as long as they have.

The trouble is, the winning team up north has the advantage of keeping their minds on the game of hockey by blending one series in with the next. A two-week layoff might have disastrous results for the Lakers even though it has afforded them the opportunity to heal their wounds and get well rested. Maintaining their motivation, particulary against a team from the PCJHL, might prove to be difficult for Ernie Gare and his coaching staff.

At the same time, the Lakers might find themselves making the serious mistake of looking ahead one series and not concentrating on the three-game mini-series in the north.

One bad game and the team would be down, with just two remaining. Run into a hot goaltender and it's all over before it's hardly begun. Combine these factors with the advantage of playing in their home-ice arena and the PCJHL representative has suddenly pared down the odds to make it an even series.

Regardless of the fact that the PCJHL winner has never won a contest against a BCJHL champion, Vernon had better not take any chances nor should they get overconfident about their chances of success against their next opponents.

Incidentally, I'm sure the league will have a legitimate beef should the opposition be Grande Prairie. After all, it's doubtful if an Alberta team was in the minds of the B.C. Amateur Hockey Association executives when they first decided to let the two leagues meet for the right to represent the province. If an Alberta team wins the PCJHL title, they should have to play the AJHL winners. After all, the BCAHA only wanted to give all junior A teams in this province a fair shake at winning all the marbles. I wonder how BCAHA President Bruce Allison would feel about an Alberta team representing the province of B.C.?

Meanwhile, the Lakers need worry about one thing — winning their next hockey game — regardless of who is their opponent. A team that has managed to post a 54-11 overall record this season needs only to win 10 of its next 17 games in order to qualify for Centennial Cup playoffs in Pembroke, Ont.

Although the club gets to play some of those games at home, they'd just as soon work things out on the road. Besides, the Lakers are still one of the best road teams in all of Junior A hockey.

So warm up the bus, driver and the Lakers will see their loyal fans later.

Much later.