Popp provides goaltending depth

By JIM JUDD
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Goaltender Willie Popp has more lives than Morris the cat where his junior hockey career is concerned. His latest lease on life is spelled L-A-K-E-R-S.



WILLIE POPP

Popp, formerly with the Richmond Sockeyes of the BCJHL Coastal Division, recently signed with the Lakers after the Vernon junior squad released troublesome backup goaltender Barry Rysz.

However, Popp, who will only be used as backup to Glen Fry, hasn't seen any game action himself since January. He has been sidelined since that time with a broken wrist which he suffered when he was on loan to the Chilliwack Eagles. In that game, Popp was run into the boards by a player from the Juan De Fuca Whalers.

Popp missed all 15 playoff games with Richomnd this season and thought his career in the junior ranks had finally reached the end of its rope.

"I was hopeing to get into the series between Richmond and Vernon but I didn't get my medical release so I wasn't able to play," he explained.

It isn't the first time Popp has found new refuge when his career was in jeopardy. After two seasons with the Ottawa 67's he found himself the odd man out as an overage player in the elite Ontario Hockey League this season.

"The OHL is only allowed two overage players so they went for goalscorers over a goaltender," Popp said.

He made his way west from Ontario, where he makes his off-season home in Mississauga, and took up with the national champion Sockeyes, under Coach Orland Kurtenbach. With his steady performance in net, the Richmond juniors might have faired better in the playoffs, particularly against the Lakers.

It was while on the sidelines of that series that Popp learned to admire the Lakers, little realizing that a few weeks later he was to be a part of the Vernon organization.

"I didn't expect them (Lakers) to be as good as they are," he said. "It's unbelievable how much depth they have for such a young team."

Popp's presence on the Vernon squad will raise its 20-year old population to five making it one of the youngest junior A clubs in the country still in contention.

The newest member of the team doesn't expect to see much duty with the team, barring unforeseen circumstances, but then again, he figures that any kind of playing time is bonus at this stage of the season.

"Glen's played a lot and maybe I can give him a rest," he said. "If I'm needed I feel I can go in and do the job.

"I'd love to play as much as I can but Glen is the guy who got them where they are," he added. "If the team hadn't picked me up my junior career would be over now."

Although he isn't overlooking the fact that the team must face a somewhat unglamorous opponent this weekend in Grande Prairie, Popp feels that the club won't face any formidable opposition until they make it to the Western Canadian championship.

"I think Saskatchewan will be the test but you can't take any teams lightly," he said. "Especially not in a short series like this next one."

The 6', 190 pound goaltender hopes to make a career in the Canadian Intercollegiate Athletic Union his next step. According to Popp he has been approached by the CIAU National champion York Yeomen to play next season.

The best-of-three provincial final series, between the Lakers and the Grande Prairie North Stars, opens Friday night. The second game is scheduled Saturday, with the third game Sunday afternoon, if necessary.