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Lakers arrive in the frozen north

By JIM JUDD
Daily News Sports

GRANDE PRAIRIE, ALTA. — To suggest that both teams are heading into tonight's confrontation with some intrepidation would be an understatement. In fact, one might liken the first meeting of these two clubs to a blind date with an ugly stepsister.

The Vernon Lakers spent two days on a bus to arrive at this Northern Alberta outpost where they know only two things for sure: the summer is still a long way off, evident by the spring snowstorm that greeted their arrival Thursday afternoon; and they would rather be anywhere else other than here at this point in the hockey season.

The Grande Prairie North Stars, had the advantage of observing the Lakers in practice Thursday night, however, that hour long on-ice session provided little in the way of satisfaction for the Vernon squad, which appeared disorganized and uncaring in their only practice here.

There were tense moments also when scoring leader Dallas Drake went down heavily after colliding with defenceman Keith Chase during a one-on-one drill. At first, the worst was feared when the slick centre rolled around holding his oft-injured knee. Later, with the benefit of an ice pack and some attention from the Vernon trainer, the injury was diagnosed as nothing more serious than a slight bruise. The back injury that caused winger Mike Barkley to also leave practice was also diagnosed as a bruise.

"It wasn't one of our better practices, but we just wanted to get aclimatized to the new rink and the ice surface," said Lakers' Head Coach Ernie Gare, who drew heavy media attention after the workout.

Meanwhile, North Stars' Head Coach Ken Head is as in the dark about the Vernon team as the Lakers are about his club.

"We don't know the Vernon hockey club so we have to go out and play our game as best we know how," he said. "All we know is that the last two Centennial Cup champions have come out of the BCJHL so they (Lakers) must be good.

"Our guys will be relaxed so the pressure is really on Vernon this series, especially in the first game."

Gare concurred with Head's analysis of the situation, recognizing the fact that the onus is on the Lakers to set the tone in tonight's game for the brief series.

"We have the pressure on us definitely, but if we play like we can, we'll be alright," Gare said. "We've worked hard to get this far and we really have to be sharp now."

The North Stars, who defeated the Prince George Spruce Kings to earn their first Peace Cariboo Junior Hockey League title, have eight players who returned from the 1986-87 squad. That club finished second in the league, behind the Quesnel Millionaires, a year ago.

Among the eight is the club's top scoring line and the trio which Head is counting on to lead his squad to against Vernon. They include centre Joe Dragon, winger Wade Wallan, and two-time PCJHL scoring champion Murray Toews, who is a five-year veteran of the club.

CJIB Sports Director Roger Knox, who covered the PCJHL for more than three seasons while working in Quesnel, feels that in spite of the North Stars' experience, the ball is decidedly in the Vernon court.

"If Vernon skates and plays like it can ... and if they stay out of the penalty box, then they shouldn't have any trouble winning these games by at least six goals," Knox said.

The North Stars, in fact, are actually surprised to be in this position...so much so that they hadn't bothered to make plans for any series after the PCJHL championship.

"Our objective this season was to win the PCJHL title and we were on a tremendous emotional high after we beat Prince George in that seventh game," explained Head. "Hopefully, we can keep up the same intensity in this series."

Series starts tonight

The Vernon Lakers meet the Grande Prairie North Stars in the opening game of the provincial junior 'A' championship series tonight, in Grande Prairie. The second game in the best-of-three series is scheduled Saturday, with the third game Sunday, if necessary. Vernon has not won the B.C. title since 1972.