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Lakers will be back . . . bigger and stronger still



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There are two ways of looking at the demise of the Vernon Lakers last weekend — the positive approach and the negative response.

On the one hand, is their season measured by their failure to make it all the way to the Centennial Cup, or, do we measure their success this year by how far they travelled past the point of mediocrity?

Well, to begin with, everyone knows that Rome wasn't built in a day. With a little patience and perserverance there's simply no doubt that Ernie Gare and Mel Lis can eventually come up with the right combination of talent and toughness to carry the name of this fair city all the way to the top of the junior A hockey pile.

However, if it never happens, at least these two have the distinction of having put together a team that has enjoyed a greater degree of success in the sport than any previous junior hockey club from Vernon.

After all, seven years ago the Vernon Lakers were the doormats of the B.C. Junior Hockey League. In fact, in that 1981-82 season they set a BCJHL record for ineptitude, losing a consecutive string of games that even a team like Summerland hasn't yet endangered.

Then came four straight seasons of mediocrity during which time the Lakers often challenged for the top in regular season play, but never got past the first round of playoffs.

Last season, under new ownership, new management and new leadership, the club managed to improve their reputation and make it all the way to the Interior Division final series.

This season, the club broke free from the stranglehold of mediocrity, compiling one of the best regular season records in league history as well as winning four playoff series and facing five post-season opponents in the process.

But for a few intangibles the club would still be battling it out with their Alberta rivals. The two teams were extremely close talent-wise, but even though the Lakers outplayed the AJHL champs in almost every one of the four games, in the end one team had slightly better goaltending than the other that made the difference.

By fine-tuning a few other areas of their game, the Lakers could easily have turned the tables in the last series. But, losing that series will serve as a valuable learning experience for both Lis and Gare, and for the players who will return next year. Knowing just what went wrong means a coaching staff can probably overcome those obstacles when they come to the same point once again.

And there's certainly no reason not to assume that the Lakers won't be right back in the thick of things again next year at this time. Like they say, the rich get richer and when word of Vernon's success spreads around it will draw even more talented players in this direction.

The Penticton Knights made it all the way to the Centennial Cup championship in May of 1985 only to lose in the final game. The following year they were right back there again, this time bigger and stronger and more determined and they won the coveted Junior A honor in 1986.

The words bigger and stronger are paramount to the operation here. It should be obvious to the Lakers' staff that when a team lasts as long as they did this season they have to have the physical strength to carry on. Even though players like Dallas Drake and Jamie Steer and Mark Greyeyes were scoring sensations through most of the season, in the end it was the biggest, trongest players who were the most effective — players such as Darcy Martini, Dane Jackson, and Duane Dennis. It really does become a situation where the strongest survive.

In future years look forward to seeing bigger and better players stocking the ranks of the Vernon Lakers. And it won't be enough to simply have the size going for them either. They'll also have to skate like the wind and have the good hockey skills to boot.

There is also a bright spot in the future of Junior A hockey in Western Canada. The road to the Centennial Cup won't be quite so long next year. In fact it's going to be shortened considerably.

In past years there was only one berth available to Western Canada unless the Centennial Cup was being hosted out here. Starting next season there will be two berths open.

One berth will be available to the winner of the Pacific Region (B.C. and Alberta) while another berth will be available to the winner of the Central Region (Manitoba and Saskatchewan).

In previous years five Junior A hockey leagues played off for one meagre berth into the National championship.

This season, both the Calgary Canucks and the Notre Dame Hounds would be in the Centennial Cup Championship instead of competing with one another for a chance to play in the national tournament.

B.C. teams, however, will still have the longest road to haul since they must still play off against the Peace-Cariboo Junior Hockey League winners before meeting the AJHL reps.

Still, it's a big victory for Western teams. Maybe one day they'll even televise the Centennial Cup and we can all see what goes on.