Lakers to face major juniors

Not so long ago, mention of the Portland Winter Hawks would strike fear into the hearts of Junior 'A' teams. Not anymore.

The Vernon Lakers play the Portland gang twice this week, Thursday in Osoyoos and Saturday in Vernon, and Laker owner Mel Lis said he fully expects his club to beat Portland.

"I wouldn't even consider playing them if I didn't think we could beat them," said Lis. "Look at their lineup. What do they have? They have four goaltenders but maybe one of them could make our team. They have maybe two defencemen who could play for us and maybe five forwards. The rest of their guys are fill-ins."

Lis was referring partly to goalie Byron Dafoe, a netminder who sparkled last year with Juan De Fuca in Junior A hockey and who is being relied upon to carry much of the load in Portland this year.

The Hawks have a large, maybe even huge, defence, anchored by Kelowna native Joey Mittelsteadt, a 6'2", 218-pounder and Roy Mitchell, 6'1" and 205 pounds.

On defence, two former Vernon Lakers are making strong bids to crack the Portland lineup this winter. Chad Biafore and Wes Elliott are last year's Lakers still in the Portland camp while spunky Mark Greyeyes is vying for a spot on the forward line. The Winterhawks held their main training camp in Edmonton this year and had 32 people vying for 22 jobs.

High-scoring forwards Dennis Holland and Troy Mick, both Vernon boys, are expected to lead the Hawks again this season but at least one of them, Mick, won't be with the Winter Hawks this time around in Vernon.

Lis said Mick's knee, the one that required minor arthroscopic surgery in the off-season, hasn't healed fully et and Portland has decided to leave him in Oregon rather than risk further injury.

Holland's status is uncertain because he is at the Detroit Red Wings training camp and it isn't certain whether or not he'll be back in junior in time to join Portland for the exhibiton swing.

"Shaw (Portland general manager Brian Shaw) told me they aren't bringing any excess baggage," said Lis. "This will be Portland's first exhibition action and we are going into these two games with every intention of beating them."

Tickets for Saturday night's game, an 8 p.m. start, are available at the Arena box office and also at Sun Valley Sports.