

# Season of highs and lows in '95-96

By Paul Svoboda

The Intelligencer

It was the best of seasons, it was the worst of seasons.

It was an autumn of great expectations, followed by the cruel reality of spring.

And, for Belleville Bulls fans, it ended all too early. Again.

The 1995-96 Ontario Hockey League season came with plenty of bold predictions for the veteran-laden Belleville Bulls. With stars like Richard Park, Craig Mills, Daniel Cleary and Joey Coombs in the lineup, OHL prognosticators were picking the Bulls to rule the OHL East Division and make a serious bid for their first-ever trip to the Memorial Cup.

After a strong regular season in the ultra-competitive East Division, Bulls roared through the preliminary playoff rounds, winning eight games and losing just once to gain a berth in the OHL Final Four, a rematch with the Guelph Storm.

Guelph had eliminated Belleville in four straight games in the previous season's OHL semi-final series, but this time Bulls were given the nod due to the experience and power of their lineup. Plus, Park, who had spent the regular season as a fourth-liner in the National Hockey League with the Pittsburgh Penguins, was back to bolster Belleville's championship hopes.

Unfortunately for the Bulls and their faithful followers, Bulls again fell to the Storm, losing a five-game series. It was a bitter pill to swallow for a team whose chemistry was altered specifically for a championship run.

Months earlier, a trip to the Memorial Cup didn't seem out of the question. The East — as expected — turned out to be a dogfight with the surprising Ottawa 67's finishing first, Peterborough Petes second and the Bulls third with a respectable 35-26-5 slate.

Offensively, Bulls were led by the hot stick of sophomore sensation Daniel Cleary, the Newfoundland

Express, who finished second overall in league scoring with 53 goals and 62 assists for 115 points, just four points back of Sarnia ace Aaron Brand.

Joe Coombs chipped in with a career-high 39 goals and former Niagara Falls Thunder sharpshooter Andrew Williamson contributed 33 markers.

On defence, Jamie Sokolsky scored 12 times and newcomers Paul McInnes and Mike Van Volsen — who came via a trade that sent Belleville blueliner Sean Brown to Sarnia — brought speed and experience to the rearguard.

Goaltender Kory Cooper was the busiest goaltender in the OHL, showing his Ironman form by starting the most games (60) and chalk-ing up the most wins (33) among his peers.

Plus, Park was suddenly back in Belleville when the Penguins decided he needed more ice time than he was getting in the NHL. In Belleville's final six regular season games, Park exploded for seven goals and six assists and the town was abuzz with anticipation.

All the pieces were in place for the playoffs.

And Bulls didn't disappoint early on, sending the Oshawa Generals to the sidelines in five tough games, showing their discipline and determination by mastering a bigger and more physical Oshawa team.

Bulls next took on the well-rested Ottawa 67's who by virtue of their regular season pennant had earned a first-round bye. This one wasn't even close.

In four straight games, the Bulls completely baffled and befuddled the 67's who were never allowed to

get out of the gate after their two-week break.

The stage was set. Belleville was back in the Final Four with a lineup that was better than the year before. And the opponent was again Guelph. Revenge was on the minds of veterans like Coombs and Mills who remembered all too well the 1995 debacle.

However, with a lineup bereft of the stars of a year before like Todd Bertuzzi (NHL Islanders) and Jeff O'Neill (NHL Whalers), the hard-working Storm again were again the bane of the Bulls, defeating Belleville in five games.

Guelph went on to the Memorial Cup tournament, hosted by Peterborough. The Bulls went home to ponder a season of hope and promise that had gone wrong in the end.

Still, despite the playoff disappointment, there were plenty of highlights for the Bulls and their fans during the 1995-96 OHL season. Here are some of them:

— Sophomore sensation **DANIEL CLEARY** produced a 53-goal, 115-point season to finish second in OHL scoring. The left winger was also named to the OHL's First All-Star Team.

— Goaltender **KORY COOPER** led the OHL in starts (60) and wins (33).

— Veteran **RICHARD PARK** finished third in final playoff scoring with 18 goals and 30 points in just 14 appearances.

— Captain **CRAIG MILLS** won the Humanitarian of the Year Award for both the OHL and the Canadian Hockey League. The award recognizes community work and service combined with leadership and hockey excellence. Mills was also in the Team Canada lineup that won the gold medal at the 1996 **WORLD JUNIOR CHAMPIONSHIP** in Boston.

— For the second consecutive season, the Bulls advanced to the **OHL FINAL FOUR**.

## Final stats for 1995-96

East Division								Central Division								West Division							
GP	W	L	T	GF	GA	P		GP	W	L	T	GF	GA	P		GP	W	L	T	GF	GA	P	
Ottawa	66	39	22	5	258	200	83	Guelph	66	45	16	5	297	188	95	Detroit	66	40	22	4	319	243	84
Peterborough	66	35	22	9	289	235	79	Kitchener	66	35	28	3	253	230	73	Sarnia	66	39	23	4	330	276	82
Belleville	66	35	26	5	300	250	75	Niagara Falls	66	29	30	7	248	238	65	Sault Ste. Marie	66	38	23	5	312	254	81
Oshawa	66	30	28	8	248	238	68	Owen Sound	66	29	32	5	274	313	63	Windsor	66	21	41	4	256	312	46
Kingston	66	29	31	6	266	267	64	Barrie	66	28	31	7	258	266	63	London	66	3	60	3	179	435	9
North Bay	66	14	45	7	242	360	35	Sudbury	66	27	36	3	262	288	57								

  

East Division								Central Division								West Division							
GP	G	A	Pts.	PIM				GP	G	A	Pts.	PIM				GP	G	A	Pts.	PIM			
Daniel Cleary	64	53	62	115	74			James Boyd	63	22	25	47	130			Murray Hogg	60	3	10	13	100		
Joe Coombs	63	39	36	75	47			Rob Fitzgerald	58	16	30	46	59			Adam Robbins	53	3	7	10	78		
Andrew Williamson	62	33	34	67	41			Jamie Sokolsky	65	12	34	46	88			Rob Guinn	43	0	7	7	81		
Dan Reja	65	22	35	57	85			Paul McInnes	66	7	27	34	95			Robin LaCour	58	2	4	6	103		
Steve Tracze	59	28	28	56	43			Craig Mills	48	10	19	29	113			Kory Cooper	60	0	6	6	8		
Marc Dupuis	66	10	46	56	45			Andrei Shurupov	53	7	11	18	12			Walker McDonald	48	1	3	4	20		
Joe VanVolsen	47	20	28	48	55			Ryan Ready	63	5	13	18	54			Jason Gaggi	14	0	1	1	6		

Sidney Inn

**CARPETMAX**

CORNER OF W. MOIRA & SIDNEY  
265 W. MOIRA BELLEVILLE  
966-9988

**20% OFF**

Our finest floors

All top-of-the-line Gold Series and new Argent™

Silver Series floors 20% off through October 21

IT MUST BE **MANNINGTON**