

Bulls finished with a bang

Team advanced to Final Four in playoffs

By Paul Svoboda

The Intelligencer

It's not how you start. It's how you finish.

That would've been a suitable motto for the Belleville Bulls in the 1994-95 Ontario Hockey League season.

The Bulls started slowly and finished with a less than impressive 32-31-3 regular season record, good for fourth place in the six-team OHL East Division. Certainly nothing to write home about. The Bulls looked like classic under-achievers.

Enter the playoffs.

First, the Bulls surprised many of their critics by knocking off the North Bay Centennials. Then, they fooled almost all the pundits by eliminating the division champion Kingston Frontenacs, a team that finished a full 20 points ahead of Belleville in the regular season standings.

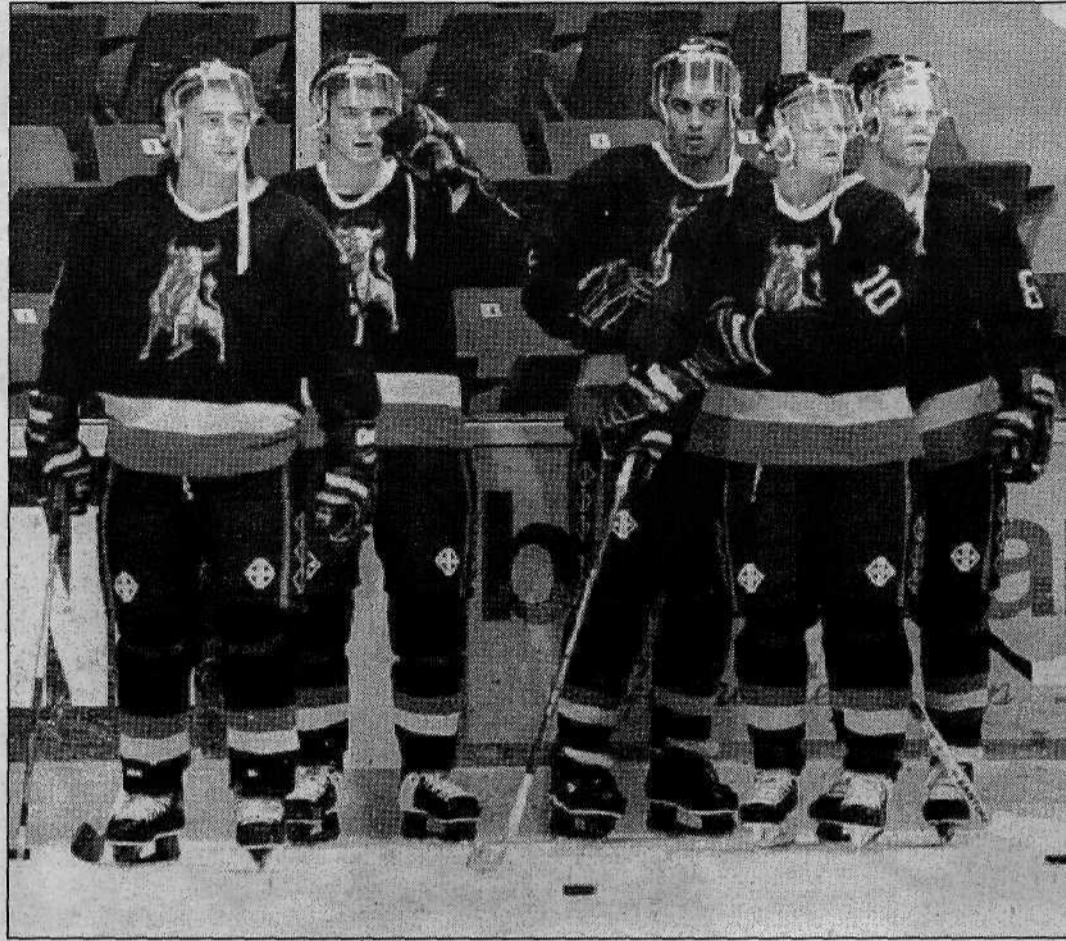
Thus, the Bulls won a ticket to the OHL Final Four as East Division playoff champions. Hardly the result most observers expected after watching the Bulls stumble to fourth place.

Alas, the Cinderella tale ended in the OHL semi-finals where the powerhouse Guelph Storm, led by juggernaut winger Todd Bertuzzi, corralled the Bulls in four straight games.

Still, the rather unlikely run to the Final Four, Belleville's first appearance in the OHL semi-finals in nearly 10 years, provided plenty of cause for celebration. What looked like a write-off of a season turned into the best Belleville finish in recent memory.

Individually, there were plenty of highlights in the regular season and playoffs. Here's a look back:

— Bulls' No. 1 pick at the OHL midget draft, DANIEL CLEARY, captured the imagination of the hockey world by embarking on a scoring ram-



Intelligencer photo by Jeff McIntosh

After a mediocre regular season the Bulls enjoyed playoff success.

page in the first half of his first major junior season. The Newfoundland native made a splashy debut with five points in his first game for Belleville, setting a new team record. Though Cleary was predictably cooler in the second half of the schedule, he finished as the leading freshman scorer in the OHL with 26 goals and 55 assists for 81 points. He was voted runner-up to 1995 NHL first draft pick Bryan Berard of the Detroit Junior Red Wings as OHL Rookie-of-the-Year.

— Together with team captain CRAIG MILLS and veteran centre BRIAN SECORD, Cleary formed one-third of the OHL's hottest troika: The Fireman Line. Broken up later in the season, the Fireman Line

provided plenty of heat for Belleville opponents. Secord finished as top team scorer with 29 goals and 53 assists for 82 points and Mills was third with 39-41-80 totals.

— After a 15-game suspension in the first half of the season for bumping an official and after playing for the USA at the World Junior Championships, Bulls centre RICHARD PARK returned to Belleville with a vengeance. Park was arguably the hottest player in the second half of the OHL regular season, finishing with 28 goals and 51 assists for 79 points in just 45 games. In the playoffs, the Pittsburgh Penguins draft pick added 27 points in 16 outings.

— The comeback story of the year belonged to another Bulls

veteran, forward JOEY COOMBS. "Philadelphia Joe" almost quit the team before training camp, unhappy with his poor totals the season before and after landing in coach Larry Mavety's doghouse for being overweight. But Mavety challenged Coombs and the former Kitchener Ranger responded. Big time. He got in shape, scored 36 goals (second only to Mills) and added 42 assists for 78 points. Plus, he counted another 25 points in 16 post-season contests. Coombs' new found work ethic and leadership qualities made him a key Bull on and off the ice.

— After a rookie season spent between the Bulls' farm club in Wellington and the Sports Centre, defenceman

SEAN BROWN blossomed. While his scoring totals weren't astounding (18 points in 58 games), Brown displayed the tools and traits that Belleville officials had been waiting for. Cool and collected in his own end, not afraid to mix it up and use the body, Brown also showed off a booming point shot and some nice puckhandling skills. In the playoffs, he was especially strong and drew the unenviable task of covering Guelph's hulking power forward, Bertuzzi, in the OHL semi-finals. Brown's hard work was rewarded at the 1995 NHL draft where the Boston Bruins made him a first round selection.

— Throughout the 1994-95 season, Bulls goaltender MARK GOWAN was a survivor. Most didn't expect Gowan, a backup to Bulls workhorse Derek Wilkinson (now playing in the Tampa Bay Lightning farm system) in the '93-94 campaign, to even make the Bulls in training camp. But he did. His poor early season play didn't seem to warrant his spot in Belleville and a thoughtful, honest Gowan was the first to admit it. But a mid-season visit from former Bull goaltending hero Craig Billington (now with the NHL's Boston Bruins) helped boost Gowan's confidence. Mavety stuck with Gowan and the decision paid off handsomely in the playoffs. Gowan suddenly found himself and was the difference in several games, helping lead the Bulls to the promised land of the OHL Final Four.

— Off the ice, Bulls found inspiration from rookie assistant coach LOUIE CRAWFORD. Hailing from Belleville's first family of hockey and with championships in both major junior and minor pro under his belt as a player, Crawford brought energy and intensity to the Bulls coaching staff. An uncompromising grinder as a player, Crawford demanded the same effort from the Bulls. And, eventually, he got it. As Belleville's successful playoff run proved, Crawford and Mavety formed a formidable coaching duo.

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