

SPORTS

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'Hawks grounded in game 7 heartbreaker

Would-be equalizer comes just a moment too late

By Herb Garbutt
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

It was the kind of goal that would have become legendary. The kind of goal that players immediately think of and relive when they look back on their hockey careers. A goal that is forever remember by fans who say 'I was there the night when ...'

But it came a split second too late.

The Milton IceHawks had their dreams of a national championship shockingly derailed by the Oakville Blades Wednesday night when their last-ditch effort came up short by the narrowest of margins in a 4-3 loss in game seven of the Provincial Jr. A Hockey League Western Conference semifinal.

The IceHawks experienced the highest high, thinking they had scored a last-second tying goal, to the lowest low when, after conferring with his linesmen, referee Sean McQuigge skated toward the benches, put his hands to his chest and then stretched out his arms, waiving off the goal and the IceHawks' dream season.

While Oakville poured off its bench to celebrate, the IceHawks were left littered across the ice, most on one knee, leaning on their stick with their heads slumped forward.

"It's a hard way to end your junior career," said veteran defenceman Jeff Caister, who made the initial point shot that was batted in by an undisclosed teammate just after the season-ending buzzer. "That's the way the series went for us. It's probably fitting."

The goal would have only forced overtime, but with Milton firing nearly double the number of shots, 39-22, at the Oakville net, it wouldn't be a stretch to believe they could have won the game — much like they did when they beat the Blades in the regular season after tying the game in the final few seconds. And from there, who knows? That's the question forever left unanswered.

The IceHawks certainly had the skill to reach their ultimate goal of a Canadian Jr. A title. Last year's Central Canadian champion Georgetown Raiders lost seven times in the regular season. Milton only lost four times in 49 games.

That's what makes Oakville's victory so mind-boggling. The Blades had to beat Milton four times in five games after falling behind 2-0 in the series. And the Blades had to win three straight after the IceHawks seemingly put them on the ropes with a 6-2 victory last Friday.

Three of the four Oakville victories, including

• see ICEHAWKS on page A20



UPENDED: Milton's Alex Eaton gets tripped up by Jesse Adair of Oakville during a big scoring opportunity in game seven at Memorial Arena Wednesday night

RON KUZYK / CANADIAN CHAMPION

Washkurak axed following elimination

By Steve LeBlanc
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

The IceHawks are done, and so is their coach.

Less than 24 hours after Milton was ousted by Oakville in the conference semifinals, bench boss Joe Washkurak was handed his walking papers.

It was announced yesterday afternoon that he was fired from the IceHawks and its affiliate Henley Sports Management, with which he was a full-time employee. Besides coaching the IceHawks, he was involved in a number of assignments for club owner Mario Forgiione's hockey corporation, which includes the ECHL Pensacola Ice Pilots and OHL Mississauga

IceDogs.

Forgione said that in light of Milton's disappointing playoff performance, it wasn't in the team's best interest to have Washkurak back next season.

"We thought it was best to make a clean break," said the IceHawks' owner.

Remarked Washkurak, "It's not a good feeling (getting fired), but I guess Mario felt we underachieved and when that happens it's usually the coach that goes. In the back of my mind I guess I knew I might have to take the fall."

Although he took over the IceHawks' coaching reins from a suspended George Dupont December 1, Washkurak was never named as a permanent replacement — and always

maintained that kept him from making significant changes to the lineup.

"I was never told this was my team. Had I not been just an interim coach, I might have done some things differently," he noted. "I'd said all along that we needed some more team guys. Not that these players aren't good guys, but when you've got a group of superstars it's hard to get them all to buy into the idea that it doesn't matter who scores at crucial times."

However, Washkurak admits Milton simply didn't live up its championship potential. "Bottom line is we didn't get the job done. We were up 2-0 and 3-1, but just couldn't put Oakville away. We had one bad week, and it was a really bad week for that to happen."

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