

'Hawks strengthen bid for sixth with victory over Caps

At the risk of stating the obvious, the IceHawks have a real uphill climb ahead of them in next month's playoffs.

But reclaiming sixth place — and avoiding a first-round encounter with front-running Georgetown or fellow powerhouse Oakville — may just allow them to keep things respectable.

That notion certainly wasn't lost on the local juniors Friday night at Memorial Arena.

With a chance to draw within

two points of Brampton, Milton delivered one of its best overall performances in what's been an extremely challenging second half — grabbing an early lead and securing a 6-3 victory.

Now granted the Capitals had just unloaded much of their scoring punch and leadership at the trade deadline, but given how much the IceHawks have struggled this season, any solid outing and

subsequent win these days is cause for optimism.

"Yeah it (opportunity to gain ground on Brampton) was definitely in our minds. We'd much rather face Burlington (in opening round)," said head coach Joe Simon, who noted things have stabilized in recent weeks since a mid-season exodus of veterans and other distractions. "I think the strong finish we had



against Georgetown the other week helped. We knew that was something we had to build on."

Recently acquired from the Dixie Beehives, journeyman goalie Carson Hau turned back 42 shots for the win, while Curtis Renaud scored two goals less than a minute apart to help Milton mount a 3-1 first-period lead.

Ricky Buehler — set to represent the club in the junior game of tonight's all-star showcase at York University — also stood out with a

goal and three assists, while Ryan Stroz potted Milton's 14th short-handed goal of the year and added two helpers.

Although going 3-for-7 on the powerplay, Simon feels a more consistent effort with the man-advantage will be needed down the stretch. A prime example of that came in Seguin Saturday, with a squandered 5-on-3 costing the IceHawks a comeback against the Bruins, who went on to sink an empty netter and prevail 5-2.

Renaud scored in the first and helped set up a second-period equalizer by Stroz, while Buehler assisted on both goals.

The loss leaves Milton winless on the road since Halloween.

Said Simon, "Along with the powerplay, we're going to need better defensive-zone coverage. There's a lot of good teams with good movement; we've got to protect our own end more."

Jeff Lynch should help in that regard. The hometown defenceman made his return to the lineup this past weekend after being off since the holidays for personal reasons.

Also on the plus side, rookie Justin Periera had the lone goal for the MacKinnon Future Stars in an 8-1 loss to their Central counterparts in last Wednesday's showcase in Orangeville. Defenceman Matt Prinsen also competed.

Now 16-21-4, the IceHawks begin a four-game home stand Friday against Burlington.

Has been a great addition to team, says Bears' head coach

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strong transition."

A coach at just about every competitive level — including the East Coast Hockey League, CIAU and OHL, with the long-since transplanted North Bay Centennials — French likely views his mid-season addition to the Bears as quite fortuitous.

That's how Woods sees it as well.

"Mark's been a real blessing that fell into our lap at a time when we really needed someone."

And while French figures there probably wasn't that many capable candidates available at the time he was hired, his efforts were enough to get himself re-signed this past summer (for one year), and have met with plenty of praise from Woods.

"He's got a great hockey mind, relates well with the players, is a really hard worker and is extremely organized."

That last part no doubt comes from wearing both the coach's and director of operations' hats with Wichita, where his run was highlighted by

a 38-18 record in 2005/06.

"Yeah I was doing basically everything there. At times it seemed like the coaching was secondary. I think having all those jobs prepared me for being an assistant at a higher level," said French. "It's nice to be able to concentrate just on coaching again. I'd say my strength is probably working with the young players to help develop their skills, but I also really enjoy building systems from the ground up, the tactical Xs and Os of the game."

One of the more challenging aspects of life behind the AHL bench is getting the top prospects ready for their jump to the 'show' while not sacrificing team success in the process.

French says that hasn't been a problem for the Bears.

"It's such a hockey hotbed here that there's a certain expectation for success, and Washington's a team that firmly believes the best preparation for their young players is to be part of a winning program (at AHL)."

Though not exactly uncommon at the AHL and NHL levels, the fact that Hershey has just one assistant coach speaks favourably of French's contribution to the top-seated club, though he downplays that notion.

"It could be a case that too many cooks spoil the broth. I really don't know."

Added Woods, "We just work really well together that I don't think another person is needed. I may be the head coach, but Mark and I make all the decisions together and he's as much a part of our success as I am."

With 13 years of coaching experience at just 37, French knows time is definitely on his side when it comes to possibly pursuing that final jump up to the NHL.

But for now he's more than content to enjoy his position with a team that looks poised for a series Calder Cup title run this spring.

"If the opportunity to take the next step came along that would be great, but then I didn't think I'd be in the AHL before 40 so I'm pretty happy."

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