

Free skate, free swim draw crowds



Stretch! - Local hockey enthusiasts, above, took advantage of the holiday time off to play some shinny hockey at Essex Memorial Arena, Dec. 27.



Prep time - Essex resident Ryan O'Neil, pictured left, helps get the skates on his son Jacob, 4, and his nephew, Mason Hrbak, 5, during the Tim Horton's freeskate, held at Essex Memorial Arena, Dec. 27.

Spish splash - Allysia Warrington, 3, and her father Ron, pictured right, enjoy a day in the pool at the Essex Recreation Complex Monday. Dozens of families came out for the free swim held New Year's Day.

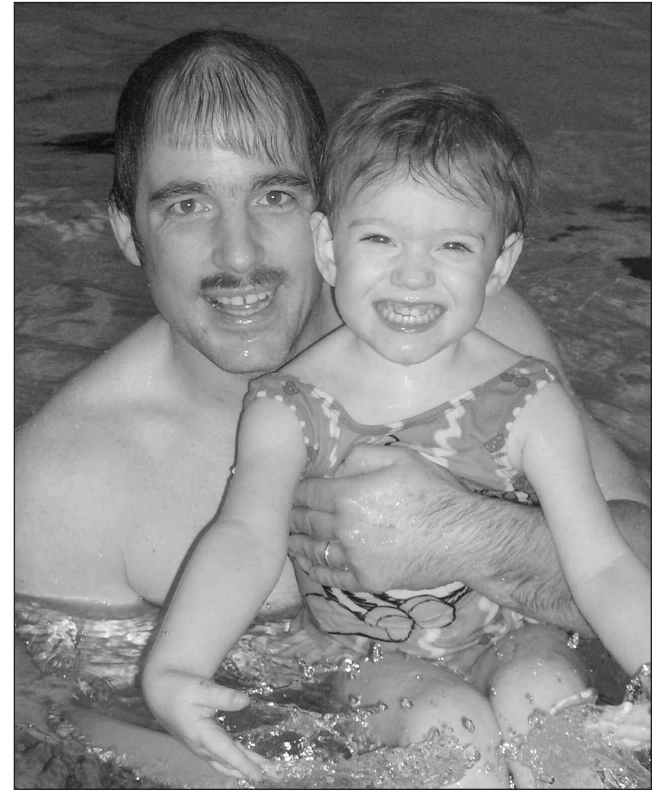


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HOCKEY HIGHLIGHTS

73's defeat Sharks, Jr. Kings in nail biters

BY KEVIN E. NEELS

The Essex 73's went from one extreme to the other during a pair of games just before the holidays. On Dec. 19, they blew a two-goal lead late in the game before winning in overtime, and on Dec. 22 they fell behind 2-0 in Dresden in the first ten minutes of the game before rallying to pick up the win.

The first period of the Wheatley/Essex tilt was very reminiscent of the Wallaceburg/Essex game of the past in which the home club found themselves parading to the penalty box time after time. The visitors received an early Christmas present from 73's netminder Ryan Barnett in the first minute of this one. Sharks sniper Ken Blain picked off an attempted pass from Barnett and made no mistake. Essex's penalty kill unit evened the score later in the period, as R.J. Hotts ripped a shot into the top corner of the net. The story for the remainder of the period was the superb penalty killing efforts of the 73's.

Period two was much more open as the teams combined for five goals. The 73's Cory Hamilton

gave the home team the lead briefly, but Ken Blain tied it less than a minute later. Essex rookie Ryan Green continues to shine in a 73's uniform as he added his second of the season, but once again the Sharks evened it up a few minutes later. Midway through the second, Rob Shepley boosted his club into the lead once more. The period ended 4-3 Essex.

The 73's looked to be on their way to victory late in the third period when Cory Hamilton dug the puck out of a scramble and roofed it to give Essex a two-goal cushion. Thirty seconds passed before it was 5-4. At 18:23 the Sharks called a 30-second timeout to discuss how they were going to even this game up. The answer: Ken Blain. Blain completed his hat trick at 19:27 as he poked in a loose puck. Off to overtime we go.

It looked like Wheatley was going to have the edge in OT as the 73's were whistled off for a tripping penalty. Exactly one minute into the penalty, however, Jeremy Venables ripped a shot off the crossbar, and into the net on a two-on-one

to give Essex the win. "Our (penalty killing) was awesome tonight, although I thought we were screwed getting that one in OT," said Mike Lepelaars. "Fortunately for us, the good teams find a way to win."

"We pride ourselves on our PK," said Ryan Breault. "I think the biggest thing for us is that the other teams seem to forget that we can score this year."

The team went into Dresden Friday with a very short bench, and although it looked like it was going to be a problem early, they showed character in the end. The Kings' power play got rolling mid-period with a pair of markers 1:26 apart. Both goals came off the stick of Breyden Belan. Essex managed to get one back before period end, as AJay Sweet picked up the garbage from a point shot.

The 73's held a wide margin of play in period two but the period was scoreless.

The visitors evened the score less than a minute into period three when a wrist shot from R.J. Hotts at the point found its way past a screened Kings goaltender.

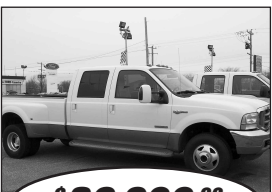
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