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Photo: Andy Comber

FLYING - Pictured left, Essex 73's no. 18 Mike Lepelaars goes airborne during the second period of Sunday's game at Essex Arena, diving for the puck over Belle River's no. 8 Matt Hayward in front of 73's goalie Eddie Wheeler.

Lack of discipline allows Canadiens back into series

BY KEVIN E. NEELS

The Essex 73's lead the best of seven final series 2 games to 1 heading back to Belle River Wednesday for game four.

Before this series began there was much hype about how great a series this was going to be, the best offensive club against the best defensive club. After three games, there has been much disappointment for the fans. Surprisingly, neither club has played up to par, in fact, not even close. Will things pick up? We certainly hope so.

Game one went last Tuesday in Essex but the Canadiens failed to generate much in the way of offense, falling by a score of 7-1.

The first ten minutes

were very slow as both teams were struggling in all aspects of their game. A long shot from Evan Stibbard opened up the floodgates just past the mid point of the opening period. Cory Hamilton, with his first of three on the night, and AJay Sweet with another, put the home team up 3-0 in a span of two minutes. The first ended this way.

R.J. Hotts greeted Belle River starting goaltender Dan Eichel with a quick wristshot that found the back of the net just 41 seconds into period two to increase the lead to 4-0, before Hamilton chased Eichel with his second of the night eight minutes later. The Canadiens managed to get on the scoreboard with their only goal of the night in the final minute of the

period.

Essex added a pair of insurance markers in the final frame. Dan Croft and Hamilton completing his hat trick, were the scorers.

"The key tonight was that we were disciplined," said AJay Sweet. "We had some help from their goaltender as well; he did not play very well for them. We can't get comfortable, however. We need to play for a full sixty minutes." "You don't want to knock a 7-1 win, but, we need to play better," said Captain Rob Shepley. "There were a lot of areas we need to improve on. Belle River just came off an emotional series with Wheatley. I expect this will be a long series."

Friday in Belle River the Canadiens were looking to

even up the series, but once again did not play like it. The first period was an absolute terrible period of hockey. Both clubs lacked intensity and were sloppy at both ends of the rink. Neither team could score in the opening period.

The 73's opened the scoring in period two while on a power play. Cory Hamilton banged in a rebound. Essex upped the lead to 2-0 late in the period thanks to a Canadiens defensive miscue. R.J. Hotts walked in untouched on Eichel and tucked it up on the top shelf where they store the peanut butter.

Belle River came out desperate in period three, not wanting to fall behind two games. It worked for them early scoring a power play goal just over two minutes in. The Canadiens killed what chance they had of getting back into the game by taking a double minor with eleven minutes left. AJay Sweet made them pay, scooping up a rebound and flipping the puck over Eichel for a 3-1 advantage. Essex rounded out the scor-

ing while shorthanded. Hotts hit an empty net with just over a minute remaining to seal a 4-1 win.

"This was a very slow game," said Wes Tan. "The only difference between the teams tonight - we waited for the breaks and capitalized. I think some of us were trying to do too much at times and when things are not going well that happens."

"We need to get the jitters out, we need to sharpen up," said veteran Chad Wolters. "The first team that gets some life will be hard to beat, I just hope that it's us."

Sunday afternoon in Essex was the scene for game three, and the 73's had an opportunity to put a stranglehold on this series. Unfortunately it did not happen, as the Canadiens took advantage of a very undisciplined Essex squad, and now trail by just a game heading back to Belle River for the next game. The visitors scored two goals while holding two man advantages and went on to post a

4-2 victory.

Belle River held a wide margin of play in period one but only held a slim 1-0 lead thanks to the great penalty killing unit of the 73's.

The Canadiens increased the lead to 3-0 after two periods.

The 73's decided it was time to play hockey in period three and tried to make a game of it but came up short. Mike Roach banged in a rebound early in the period giving the fans some hope. Brit Ouellette made it close with a power play marker at the 15-minute mark but that was as close as it got. The visitors added a short-handed empty netter with less than a minute remaining to put the icing on the cake.

"They got under our skin, and we didn't keep our heads in the game," said Ryan Breault. "We need to play physical, but not stupid. It's disheartening to lose, but a loss is not always a bad thing. Hopefully we can learn from this."

SEE 73'S PAGE 17

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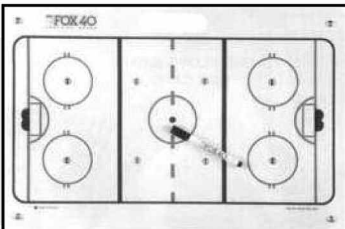
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