

73's take Junior C title

BY KEVIN E. NEELS

The Belle River Canadiens gave all they had, but in the end the Essex 73's proved to be too much for them. After winning game three in Essex last Tuesday, the Canadiens headed home with some much needed confidence and a chance to even the series up on home ice. But it was not meant to be. After falling at home last Wednesday, Belle River was faced with having to win three straight games starting with Friday night's game in Essex, but 73's goaltender Eddie Wheeler and the despised Vince Santia ended the Canadiens hopes for this season.

Essex started off game four Wednesday night in fine fashion, scoring just 1:22 in, as Vince Santia spotted a loose puck and poked it past netminder Dan Eichel. The 73's looked sluggish for much of the remainder of the period getting into some penalty trouble, which cost them the lead. Belle River cashed in on a 5 on 3 to leave the game deadlocked after one period.

Period two was a different story as the 73's probably played their best hockey of the series and jumped into a 3-1 lead in the process, with Cory Hamilton scoring on a power play and AJay Sweet handling a perfectly timed deflection.

Belle River made things interesting in the third, scoring a goal with just over

three minutes remaining, but, R.J. Hotts ended the home team's dreams with a pair of goals in the final minute and a half, one in the empty net, for a 5-2 final.

"We managed to get into some trouble in period one again with the penalties, some of which were questionable, but for the most part they were hard working penalties, not the dumb kind," said Cory Hamilton. "We find ourselves in a perfect situation now, up 3-1 going back home. I think it will be all over Friday night."

"After the first period we stayed disciplined which was key, as most of their goals are coming from the power play," Chad Slade added. "This was a huge win, but we need to be ready for Friday."

The Canadiens needed to stay alive Friday evening and, to their credit, they played a wail of a hockey game. A crowd of nearly 900 showed up for what they hoped would be another Essex Great Lakes championship, number five in the past six years.

The home team looked very tentative in period one and let the Canadiens dictate the play. Belle River had the only marker of the period, compliments of another 5-on-3 power play. Eddie Wheeler kept the score this close.

The visitors increased the margin to 2-0 with yet another power play goal in the thirteenth minute of play. The 73's received a

huge momentum booster in the final minute of the period when rookie Evan Stibbard stepped over the Belle River blueline and ripped a wrist shot into the top corner of the net past Eichel.

This woke the natives up for period three as they came at the Canadiens with everything they had, but it was Belle River who got the first laugh as they went up 3-1 just before the midpoint of the period. Surprisingly, this did not seem to bother the home squad as they continued to come at the Canadiens.

It paid off a couple of minutes later when Chris Warren lifted a shot into the net on a nice feed from Vince Santia to pull within one. Three minutes later, while on a power play, Dan Croft slid a rebound past Eichel to send the crowd into hysteria. Essex buzzed around the Canadiens goal for the remainder of the period but could not end it, sending this one into overtime for the first time in the series.

Belle River faithfuls did not have to agonize for long. Just 3:07 into the extra period, Vince Santia's backhand found the twine and it was all over. Essex had claimed yet another Great Lakes championship and now move on to try to capture the all Ontario title.

"I think the late goal in period two definitely sparked us," said Evan Stibbard. "All night I felt that we were somehow

going to pull this thing out. I am looking forward to the break now but we will be ready to go for the next series."

"Belle River had their backs to the wall, and they played like it," said Vince Santia.

"This is the best I have seen them play all year. This victory was for Coach 'P'," he added, referring to coach and general manager Tony Pirofski.

At this stage, it is uncertain which team Essex will face next. Once the other three series are over, geographical location will determine who plays whom. Keep tabs on local newspaper and radio coverage for more information as it becomes available.

Updates on the other series are as follows:

Grimsby is leading Norwich 3 games to 2.

Kincardine is leading Penetang 3 games to 2.

Lakefield is leading Amherstview 3 games to 2.



No entry - Essex 73's no. 5 Vince Santia checks a Belle River player during second period action in the Great Lakes Junior C final Friday in Essex.



THAT'S GOTTA HURT! - Essex 73's Captain Rob Shepley protects the puck from Belle River's Matt Haddad during Friday night's game.

2nd Annual **FRI, APRIL 13 • 9 A.M. - 5 P.M.**
SAT, APRIL 14 • 9 A.M. - 4 P.M.

OPEN HOUSE

FREE BBQ

Rain or Shine!

DOOR PRIZES

11 A.M. - 3 P.M. BOTH DAYS

COME VISIT OUR SHOWROOM & REPAIR FACILITY. SEE THE NEW PRODUCTS FOR 2007.

In Store Specials These Two Days Only!

TORO REBATE PROGRAM: March 15 - May 15, 2007 on all Super Recycler SR4 mowers.

MANUFACTURERS REPRESENTATIVES ON HAND.

Great Lakes Outdoor Power Equipment

35 Victoria Ave., Essex, ON N8M 1M4 **519-776-8778**

STORE HOURS:
Mon. - Fri. 8:30 - 5:30,
Sat. 9:00 - 2:00

TECUMSEH **KOHLER engines**
LAWN-BOY
BRIGGS & STRATTON **ECHO**
TORO **SNAPPER**
Count on it.