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Bantams and Midgets in Ontario finals

Stouffville has two hockey teams in the this year's all-Ontario championships.

The Bantam Clippers became the second Stouffville squad to reach the OMHA BB finals with a 4-2 win in Midland Sunday afternoon. They now join the Midgets who advanced to the finals with a win over Midland last week.

The Midgets won their best of five semi-final series 3-1, but the Bantams had to go the distance before finally beating the strong Midland squad in the deciding game.

The Bantam Clippers are the defending OMHA BB champions.

Bantam coach Kerry Keller said it was a "tremendous series, and the final game typified the whole thing."

The visiting Clippers had every reason to be concerned when Midland opened the scoring midway through the first period. Up to that point in the series, the home team always scored first and always won.

However, Scott McKinley's power play goal on a set up from Darren Baston and Sven Hennze put the Clippers back into it in the second.

The Clippers dominated the second period, outshooting Midland 20-5, but they were unable to score again and they went into the third deadlocked at 1-1.

Just over four minutes into the final frame, Peewee captain Jason Underwood, who was promoted to the Bantams for this series, scored to put the Clippers ahead. Assists on the goal went to McKinley and Hennze.

Underwood scored again with 3:50 left in the game when he circled behind the net and banged one in off the Midland goalie from a bad angle.

"Midland made a mistake on that goal, and it hurt them," Keller said. Before game five, he had predicted that a bad goal might mean the series.

With a two goal lead and time running out, the Stouffville players began an early celebration which quickly ended when Midland made it 3-2 with 43 seconds remaining.

Midland was threatening to tie it up before Craig Stronach made an incredible play, blocking a shot from the point and picking up the puck himself and firing it at the empty Midland goal from just outside the blueline. The puck bounced of both goal posts before finally going in.

"I was just dying when it hit the posts," Keller said.

With only 36 seconds left, the Stouffville bench exploded with Stronach's goal. So did the large contingent of Stouffville fans at the Midland arena.

"The key to the game for us was strong defence, excellent back checking and the phenomenal play of goalie Scott Evans," Keller said.

He had nothing but praise for his players and the Midland team after the series.

"The boys really deserved this, they've worked so hard," he said. "We've been practicing for Midland all year."

He added that because Midland finished on top of the league and weren't seriously challenged during the regular season, they were ripe for an upset.

"It can be tough when you're on top, everybody's always trying to knock you off," he explained.

The Bantams will face Belle River in the all-Ontario finals, and play could begin as soon as this weekend in the best of five series, Keller said.

Belle River is located just east of Windsor, almost a six-hour drive away, so there will no week-night games in the series.

Keller admitted to not knowing much about the Belle River squad. "They beat Hespeler in the semis, and I know that Midland destroyed Hespeler when they played so we should be compatible," he said.

One thing Keller is worried about is a possible let down by his players after the emotional Midland series. A lot of people felt that the real Ontario championship was between Midland and Stouffville, and winning the finals would be merely a formality.

"It was a tremendous victory, but we've got to remember we've still got some hockey left to play this season," he said.

The Midget Clippers opponents for the Ontario championships will be the winners of the Belle River-Beamsville series.

Bruins eliminated from hockey playoffs

The hockey season ended for the Junior C Uxbridge Bruins Friday night with a whimper.

The Bruins lost 2-1 at home to the Bowmanville Eagles and were eliminated from further playoff action in the Central Ontario League.

Uxbridge, Bowmanville and the Lakefield Chiefs were involved in a round robin series that would see two of the teams advance to the Central Ontario finals.

The Bruins lost all four games they played in the series to find themselves eliminated.

Going into action last week the Bruins had a slim chance of advancing if they won both their games. Instead they lost 6-4 in Lakefield last Tuesday night, and then they dropped the Bowmanville game Friday and that was the season.

Bruin goal scorers against Lakefield were Kevin Smith, Paul Butterworth, Lee Brown and Chris Brown. Chris also scored the lone Bruin marker in the Bowmanville game.

"We should have been able to advance," said Bruin coach Randy Hall, "but we didn't have a good game in the whole series."

Hall said he thought his team might have been "burned out" after two very tough and emotional playoff victories over Port Perry and Little Britain.

Those wins gave the Bruins the Walter Crowley Divsion title this season.

The team also fought back from an 11 point defecit midway through the season to tie Port Perry for first place at the end of the regular season.

"We've been playing a lot of tough hockey without a break for a long time," Hall said. "We're a better team than what we showed in this last series, we just didn't play up to par."

Even though it's a long way away, Hall said he was optimistic for next years Bruins.

"Fifteen of the players are eligible to play next year, I don't know if they all will, but that's the nucleus for a good team," he said.

Hall said that over the season the play of Stouffville's Joe Risk in net and defenceman Lee Brown was especially impressive.

Flyers, Caddy's earn first-round SIHL bye

Williamson Motors Cadillacs and the Stouffville Stockyards Flyers have earned a bye into the semi-finals in SIHL hockey action.

Both teams had a record of four wins and one loss after the league's five game round robin playoff series finished up Saturday night.

The remaining four teams in the SIHL will battle it out next Saturday to determine who will face the Flyers and the Cadillacs.

Last Saturday, Burger Treat Penguins upset the Flyers 7-3.

Al Stewart and Harold Wideman with a pair of goals each led the Pens.

Meanwhile, the Cadillacs ran over Canadian Tire Blackhawks 13-9. Doug Feasby had an incredible night for the Cadillacs as he found the back of the net six times.

In another defensive struggle, A & S Construction Red Wings beat Dave Blow Insurance Whalers 9-8.

Keith McGuckin with a hat trick led the Wings, while Kent Danforth had four goals for the Whalers.

This Saturday, the Penguins take on the Whalers and the Blackhawks face off against the Red Wings.

Uxbridge skaters win at Ontario Games in London

Jennifer Cook of the Uxbridge Skating Club won the silver medal in the Novice Ladies division at the Ontario Games this weekend in London.

Last month, Jennifer, 15, won the gold medal at the Canada Winter Games.

Uxbridge's Tracy Taylor, 13, skating in the same division finished seventh. Some of the best skaters from across the province competed at the Games.

The dance pair of Jill Cassie and Troy McCully, also of the Uxbridge Skating Club, skated to the bronze medal in Pre-Novice Dance category.

Stouffville skating stars

Members of the Stouffville Figure Skating Club fared very well in a number of recent competitions. Left to right: Susan Anderson placed in the top ten of the Pre-Novice Ladies division in North Bay. Anna Hamilton was third in her flight and ninth overall in the Juvenile Ladies at the same competition. Brenda Hickey was third overall in the Novice Ladies Solo Dance at the Cup of [illegible]. [illegible] Stephanie Barclay was fourth [illegible] NORTH BAY [illegible] Elizabeth Davis was [illegible] in North Bay. — Alan Shackleton

Karl Winterstein:

Pigeon racer earns respect

By ALAN SHACKLETON
Sports Editor

Racing pigeons owned by Karl Winterstein of Claremont, have to earn a name by how fast they fly, but not so their owner. Mr. Winterstein is one of Canada's most respected and well known authorities on the sport.

The 66-year-old vice-president of the Stouffville Racing Pigeon Club, became involved in pigeon racing about 40 years ago, and since then he's built up an impressive reputation which includes a number of national championships.

You may remember seeing him in a Lotto 649 commercial last year along with Sean O'Sullivan and a number of other champions in a variety of sports.

"That was quite an experience," he remembered. "They came up and shot about six hours of film and I think I was in the commercial for maybe eight seconds."

The commercial did lead to more recognition though, and shortly after it aired he was featured in a segment of Harvey's People (a profile done by former CTV newsman Harvey Kirk) shown nationally on Canada AM.

All the attention doesn't mean Winterstein gets stopped on the street by complete strangers wanting to talk pigeons, but internationally, he is considered one of this country's foremost pigeon racers and breeders.

He still chuckles when he thinks back to the day in 1980 when, during an international pigeon racers convention in Toronto, four bus loads of visitors drove up the dirt road to his small hilltop farm in east Claremont to tour his lofts.

"That little sideroad has never seen a day like that before or since," he said.

The origins of pigeon racing go back to about 150 years ago when the birds were used as a means of communication for armies, financial houses and news services, Winterstein said.

These were the days before telephones, radios and telegraph lines, and sending messages by pigeon was often one of the fastest means available.

With the advent of new technologies, the amazing talents of the pigeon were put to a more recreational use. However, even today they are still considered part of the communications force of most armies.

"We are a complete military communications unit should we ever be needed," Winterstein explained.

In the last two World Wars, pigeons were used extensively as a method of relaying messages. In World War Two, reporters often sent their dispatches back to England by pigeon as it was the only means available to them.

In peacetime though, pigeon racing is the name of the game.

There are over 2 million pigeon fanciers in the world, Winterstein said, about a thousand in Canada and 200,000 in the United States.

Karl Winterstein (left) of Claremont is internationally known as a pigeon racer and breeder. Here he displays one of his best prospects for the upcoming season, the Ace of Spades, while grandchildren Tessa Lewis, 7, of Uxbridge and brother Tommy, 12, help out. Pigeon racing is a family affair in the Winterstein household. — Alan Shackleton

Stouffville has a fine history of involvement with champion pigeons. Long time resident Alec Couts, who lives in Parkview Village, bred the Canadian Racing Pigeon Hall of Fame winner in 1963, Winterstein pointed out.

Most pigeon fanciers tend to be in urban areas," he added. "There's not too many out in the country."

One reason for this is there are not as many natural enemies for the pigeons in urban areas. For instance, living in Claremont means Winterstein has some trouble with hawks, and over the years he has lost a number of pigeons to them while training.

"I've lost a few really good prospects to hawks," he said. "You don't actually see the hawk taking the pigeon down, but one day they just don't come back from a training run."

This is the worst time of the season for hawks in the area as many of them are in migration, and Winterstein won't begin training his pigeons for another two weeks at least.

Training pigeons to come home to their loft may seem complicated but it's relatively simple, Winterstein said.

Basically, the training process consists of releasing the pigeons from the loft to fly around, get some exercise and a look at the landscape which they do for awhile and then return to the loft when Winterstein blows a special whistle.

They come back because the loft is their home, it's where their nests are and their food is.

There's nothing so mysterious about a bird going for a fly around the neighbourhood and then coming home. Robins, crows and blue jays do it all the time.

What makes the pigeon so amazing is that it can be driven to a location some 500 miles away in a truck, released with about a thousand others and make its way back to the home loft, often on the same day.

With about two weeks before a race, the training becomes a little more complicated, Winterstein said, as the birds are trained by being road tossed.

"You put the pigeon in the backseat, drive down the road five miles stop and release it," he explained. "You keep increasing the distance by five miles each time. Within 20 miles, they can see the loft from the air so it's not so hard getting back, but between 20 and 40 miles away they sometimes make mistakes. Over 40 miles and it's instinct."

Obviously, the birds that do well in training are the best prospects come race day. Winterstein said there's no way you can tell if a pigeon will be a good racer just by looking at it.

"It's an elusive thing that makes a champion pigeon," he said. "They're not like livestock and cattle where you can look for certain visible characteristics."

Curiosity and intelligence are good signs for racers, but "it's like panning for gold," Winterstein said.

As with race horses, the theory that champions breed champions holds fairly true with pigeons. "All the laws of genetics are followed," he said.

However, since there isn't much prize money in pigeon racing in Canada, just trophies and the honor of winning, champion pigeons don't command stud fees the way horses do. Also, a pigeon produces offspring in larger numbers and much more quickly than horses do.

Winterstein has about 80 pigeons in his loft at the moment, though the numbers keep changing. With so many birds, only the special ones are given names.

"They have to be a Gretzky of pigeons before they get a name," he explained.

Two of Winterstein's Gretzky's are Alfa Ben and Alfa Dale who were Canadian Champions in 1978 and 1981 respectively.

The second part of their names comes from Bendale Secondary School in Scarborough where Winterstein was a trades teacher for 19 years until his retirement in 1982.

Mostly, the pigeons are identified by the code number on the band around their legs, but if they win a number of races Winterstein takes note of them puts a playing card in front of their nest. At the moment, he has two aces and a number of face cards in the loft.

The pigeon racing season in Canada runs from mid-May to mid-September and Winterstein races in the Lake Simcoe Combine.

Race distances vary from 200 miles and under for younger birds, all the way up to 520 miles which is the distance of the prestigious Upper Canada National that starts in Fraserdale.

Points are accumulated over the seasons by positions finished in races by each loft.

Most races will have between 1,000 and 1,400 pigeons in them, Winterstein said. This seems like a lot, but races in Europe commonly attract 50,000 birds and the Orleans Race in Holland and Belgium gets some 165,000 birds, he added.

The winner of the race will be the pigeon with the best average speed. This is the only way to determine finishers because the bird's home lofts are all over the province.

The time a bird arrives back at the loft is recorded and a straight line drawn between the loft and the release point to determine the average speed.

Special clocks are used in each loft that punch in the time that the leg band of the returning bird is dropped into them. Once the band has been put in the clock it cannot be taken out again.

Winterstein's love of pigeons and of pigeon racing is obvious, and it's something he's passed on to two of his sons who also race pigeons.

Karl and his wife Marie have seven children, and 21 grandchildren. Some of the grandchildren are also taking an interest in pigeon racing and no visit is complete without a trip to the lofts.