

SPORTS

Spirit 'proud' of team's longest playoff run

Players look to next year — here or at college

Tears flowed from the players' long faces in the still of the Stouffville Spirit dressing room early Sunday night.

It was hard to imagine this had been the best season in the franchise's eight-year history.

Moments before, the Spirit lost 5-4 to the Aurora Tigers to drop the Provincial Junior A Hockey League's North Conference championship series 4-2. As it has been for most of the playoffs, the Stouffville Arena was standing room only with a crowd of about 1,000.

"It's hard because of the guys inside there," said towel-clad captain J.D. Smithson, signing hockey sticks for two boys outside the dressing room.

"I've played with a lot of great hockey players, but I wouldn't want to go into a third period with anyone but these guys."

This year's edition of the Spirit had the longest playoff run ever, winning two post-season series, 10 games and a legion of local fans. It will also graduate a record number of players to U.S. colleges and possibly the Ontario Hockey League and Canadian universities.

Smithson was the only five-year player in team history and one of three 20-year-old graduates. He'll complete the three-year firefighting program at Seneca College next year and hopes to play pro lacrosse with the New York Saints.

The other overagers, pesky forward Brent Chandler and goalie Michael Andreoff, plan to play college hockey next season. Both were acquired on the trade deadline in January.



Aurora Tigers' forward Jessie Olden (43), knocks down Stouffville Spirit forward Mike Forgie during action in Sunday's sixth and final game of the Provincial Junior A Hockey League South Division final at the Stouffville Arena. The Tigers captured the series in six games with a 5-4 win.

STAFF PHOTO / BILL ROBERTS

Kevin Jarman (UMass) and Mike Forgie (Wayne State) have accepted major college full scholarships. Jarman is the top-ranked Provincial league player in the NHL draft set for June in Nashville.

Second-year defenceman Mark Mitchell has another year of eligibility, but is weighing U.S. scholarship options.

So is rookie Mike Sullivan, a near lock for Spirit playoff MVP. He had three assists Sunday and was the team's top post-season pointgetter.

The Stouffville minor hockey product,

who was the Spirit's timer and scorekeeper in the late 1990s, has received several scholarship offers and inquiries for this fall and 2004. He remains undecided but did visit Niagara University near Buffalo last week.

"As young a team as we were, you couldn't have asked for any more," he said. "We poured our hearts out. We will lose some key players for next season, but I think we can be even better."

Aurora had the oldest team — average age 19.7 — in the North, according to NHL

Central Scouting, and the Spirit the youngest at 18.4.

You couldn't accuse the Spirit of quitting during the playoffs. It came back from late 2-0 deficits in the first two games of its opening-round series with Couchiching en route to a four-game sweep.

The Spirit trailed Newmarket in Game 7 of its second-round series but scored five unanswered goals in the second period to eliminate the Hurricanes.

Against Aurora, which lost only three games during the regular season, the Spirit won two straight games with late goals after losing the series opener.

It was Aurora that erased a two-goal deficit and won 3-2 Friday in Aurora.

Sunday, Aurora appeared to be on cruise to the trophy, winning 4-0.

But the Spirit electrified the big crowd with three straight goals — Mitchell, Smithson and Forgie — in the second period to make it 4-3. The teams then traded goals.

"I'm really proud of the way our guys worked," Spirit head coach Brian Perrin said. "The result wasn't what we wanted, but the effort definitely was."

There was praise from the winning locker room, too.

"I said all year long that we feared this Stouffville hockey team," said Aurora head coach Marty Williamson, whose team will contest a league semifinal series against the West Conference champion Georgetown Raiders starting Friday night at the Aurora Community Centre.

"They matched up real well with us. (Spirit head coach) Brian Perrin had them playing real structured hockey and playing the way hockey is supposed to be played."

— with files from John Cudmore

Spirit coaches, co-owner at odds with league over playoff officiating

Stouffville Spirit assistant coach Jeff Perrin was livid. His brother, Spirit head coach Brian Perrin, was more philosophical in his anger.

The Spirit junior A hockey team's 2002-03 season had just ended Sunday afternoon in a packed Stouffville Arena, courtesy of a 5-4 loss to the Aurora Tigers.

As the Tigers celebrated their second straight North Conference championship, Jeff Perrin walked across the ice toward referee Mike Pierce. The man in stripes waved Jeff off, then skated off.

The brothers Perrin were upset over a pair of "cheap calls" given their players at crucial stages of the game and non-calls made on Aurora.

Later, Spirit co-owner Zeev Werek and a league supervisor of officials had a heated exchange in the arena corridor.

"I've been really disappointed with the refs the last two series," said Brian Perrin, the coach with the longest tenure in the North Conference. "We're not angels either, but when you constantly see your top players playing with an extra hand on their sticks or an arm around them, it's very frustrating. I know it's frustrating for our guys."

"I don't think there's any integrity in this league. The league doesn't listen to the people who pay the bills, the teams and their owners. They listen to the people who work for the league, the supervisors. They need some

new blood."

The Spirit fought back from a 4-0 deficit to within one goal twice, but couldn't tie the score. A penalty to Cale Tanaka near centre ice with around three minutes to play dashed any hopes of a comeback.

Brent Ladds, president of the Ontario Hockey Association, said the organization doesn't make public comments on officiating. He did say though, the series was closely monitored.

"We don't get into specifics, but we had supervisors at the series and they were satisfied with the job that the officials did," he said.

— with files from Mike Hayakawa

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