# Tigers, Spirit meeting again in North Conference final

BY JOHN CUDMORE
*Staff Writer*

What happens in the regular season stays in the regular season.

That being the trend thus far in the North Conference playoffs, toss out the six-game regular season form between the Aurora Tigers and Stouffville Spirit. After all, the combatants in the Ontario Provincial Jr. A Hockey League's best-of-seven North Conference final managed to accomplish exactly that in eliminating the top seeds in semifinal round action.

The Spirit, which finished fourth in the nine-team conference, pulled off a 4-3 overtime victory over the first-place Huntsville Otters Tuesday night in Huntsville to join Aurora in the North final for the third consecutive year. Meanwhile, third-place Aurora upended the Newmarket Hurricanes one week ago, scoring a 2-1 overtime victory in the fifth game of their series.

In both cases, the results bounced teams that had received first-round byes based on regular season performance.

**'HELLUVA GOALTENDER'**

"It shows again that what happens in the regular season doesn't really matter," said Tigers head coach Jerome Dupont yesterday, lauding the Spirit for "quite an accomplishment," in overcoming a 3-2 games deficit against the Otters, a team many observers considered the class of the North Conference.

"Stouffville is a dynamic, offensive team and Trevor O'Neill is a helluva goaltender who keeps them in most games," said Dupont. "I'm thinking it will be a long series."

Game 1 goes Friday and Game 3 Tuesday at the Aurora Community Centre. Game 2 is Saturday and Game 4 Thursday at the Stouffville Arena. All are 7:30 p.m. starts

"We expect another great series just like the last one," said Spirit rookie head coach Dave D'Ammizio whose will have his hands full matching skills with a shrewd counterpart in Dupont. "We hope to continue how we played in the Huntsville series against Aurora."

The series brings together a couple of teams touted for their abilities to get under an opponents' skin. The Tigers were able to absorb the best the frustrated Newmarket Hurricanes could dish out and turn the other cheek and pounce for 10 power play goals in the series, including nine over the final three games. The Hurricanes simply fell apart before their eyes.

**UNDER THEIR SKIN**

"Stouffville did the same thing to Huntsville so we'll probably get some of our own medicine," said Dupont, noting the Spirit's ability to push the buttons of the undisciplined Otters.

On the other hand, Aurora limited Newmarket's power play, one of the best during the regular season, to just three goals.

"The team that makes the fewest mistakes or has the best special teams will probably get through," said D'Ammizio. "Aurora is highly offensive and skilled, just like our team."

The Tigers, who are the defending Canadian champions, will play for the North Conference title for the seventh straight season. In that span, including three under Dupont, Aurora has emerged victorious five times.

Last year's run to the title included a five-game series win over the Spirit in the North final. In 2006, the Spirit knocked off Aurora in six games en route to the OPJHL final.

For the record, Aurora won four of six regular season clashes between the teams, including one in overtime.

Given the unpredictability of the semifinal round, don't expect the Tigers to let those numbers rattle around in their heads.

"I'd like to think we won't," Dupont said. "We want to keep that in check."

*-with files from Jim Mason*

# 'A resilient group of kids': GM

*From* ***page 1.***

league scouts have followed the 18-year-old, who is expected to be picked in the first three rounds of June's NHL draft, in packs all season.

"It gets you into the game right away, but you really don't think of the scouts that much," he said. "It's about your teammates and the 20-year-olds who are in their last year of junior. It's my final year playing in Stouffville, too, so we all want a championship."

Mark Sullivan, one of those 20-year-olds, had two goals and an assist. The former Spirit timekeeper's second goal, with 2:42 with remaining in regulation, tied the score at 4-4, eventually sending the game into overtime and the Spirit bench into an immediate frenzy.

"After that, we had a new life," said the Stouffville resident, whose brother, Mike, starred with the Spirit six years ago. "There were no doubts. We all said, 'we can't lose this.'"

The goals were Sullivan's first in 10 playoff games, to go with 12 assists.

Jonathan Cristini, another of the 20-year-olds, had the other goal. Archibald, a standout all series, had two assists.

Trevor O'Neill earned the win for the Spirit, which was outshot 39-33.

"Trevor was our MVP this series," Spirit GM Thomas Milne said. "We were down 4-3 and had no life and Trevor somehow stops three sure goals, including two breakaways.

"But, we've got a resilient group of kids here. They block shots, they do whatever it takes to win."

Huntsville may have taken the Spirit too lightly, especially early in the series.

"They gave us some pretty good bulletin-board material," said Sullivan of the confident Otters.

The Spirit will play the defending national champion Aurora Tigers for the North title for the third straight year. Aurora won last year and the Spirit in 2006.

"Aurora is so well coached, it will be another good series," said Sullivan of his third trip to the conference final in three years with the team. "It will be a battle, just like the last two years."

Trivino was enjoying handshakes and hugs from a large group of relatives who made the trip to Huntsville.

"We can enjoy this tonight," the Etobicoke resident said. "Then it's back to work tomorrow."

The North final will begin Friday night in Aurora. Game 2 is Saturday at 7:30 p.m. in Stouffville.


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