

SPORTS: CIS hockey has Stouffville flavour

# Once Spirit youngsters, Conway, Speers shoot for CIS supremacy

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THUNDER BAY – Neil Conway and Dan Speer share a unique spot in Stouffville hockey history.

The only two under-aged players in the 15-year history of the Stouffville Spirit Jr. A team have never met.

They may get that chance this week as their teams vie for the Cavendish CIS University Cup here in northwestern Ontario.

Conway, 22, has grabbed the starting netminder's job while earning straight A's in the classroom during his first year at Saint Mary's University in Halifax.

Speer, 25, will complete his five-year run with the host Lakehead University Thunderwolves this weekend. He'll finish his MBA this summer.

Both played for the Spirit as 15-year-olds (Speer was actually 14, two months shy of his birthday) back when players under age 16 were allowed to play Jr. A in Canada, then played in the Ontario Hockey League.

"I've seen a lot of North America," said Conway after practice at the Fort William Gardens Wednesday.

In order, his hockey passport has stamps from Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Stouffville, Owen Sound, Green Bay, Oshawa and Halifax.

"I wouldn't have guessed I would end up at Saint Mary's in a million years," the Ohio product said. "When I played in Stouffville, I didn't even know what the CIS was. There were a lot of ups and downs in the OHL. But this couldn't have worked out better."

Named to the national all-rookie team this week, he is the only American on the six teams shooting for the Canadian championship. Conway's parents and brothers are here to see him play for the first time this season.

As he does for his business courses, Conway did his homework before landing at Saint Mary's.

Brock was another possibility and a few other Atlantic schools showed interest, but he knew Saint Mary's would likely need a new goalie next season. Even so, he wasn't counting on becoming the starter and helping his team to the national championship tournament.

"We rotated our goaltenders all year — until Neil got hot," said Saint Mary's head coach Trevor Stienburg, who is as impressed with his rookie's save percentage (.936 to lead the nation in the playoffs) as he is with his grade point average (4).

"I've got to figure out how I can get him to fail some classes so I can keep him around longer," the coach said, tongue in cheek. "Neil is just so passionate, maybe too passionate."

"If people (in Stouffville) want to know how to be successful, just spend a few days in Neil Conway's shoes."

Depending on who is telling the story, Stouffville resident Cory Tanaka is either following Conway's shoes or protecting them.

The pair met in Grade 10 at Stouffville District Secondary School.

"He needed a bodyguard in high school," Tanaka said. "Still does."

They're rookie roommates in their Halifax dorm, classmates in biz school and teammates on the ice.

Tanaka had offers to play at schools across the country after five years at Belleville and Plymouth in the Ontario Hockey League.

"CIS hockey is pretty similar to the OHL," he said. "Most of the players are from the O or the (Quebec Major league)."

He's been a key contributor in the playoffs, his coach said.

Another rookie on Saint Mary's is ex-NHLer Mike Danton.

He spent more than five years in jail, including time in a northern Minnesota prison just south of here, for his part in a murder-for-hire plot.

The Brampton native is drawing plenty of media attention here, but in the dressing room he's just another Husky.

"Just one of the guys," Tanaka said.

After one season in Spiritland, Speer played Jr. A in Collingwood then in Sudbury and Barrie of the OHL. As a 14-year-old, he was more highly regarded than future NHLer and Olympic gold medallist Eric Staal.

Both were born in Thunder Bay in 1984.

"Danny has really matured a lot," Lakehead coach Joel Scherban said. "He's always been a skilled player, but his overall game has improved. And he's taken on a leadership role."

Speer, the third-highest scorer in school history, hopes to play pro in Europe next season.

First, he'd like to hoist the national championship trophy tomorrow night here in his hometown.

"The five years went by so quickly," said Speer, who sports a magnificent playoff beard. "I think I put up pretty good numbers, but the only thing that's missing is (the Canadian title)."

Rogers Sportsnet (channel 32 in Whitchurch-Stouffville) is broadcasting the last three games of the CIS championships. Today, Saint Mary's and McGill play at 2 p.m. and Lakehead and Alberta play at 7 p.m. The championship is on Sunday at 7 p.m. The other teams taking part are Manitoba and Trois-Rivieres.



Former Stouffville Spirit Neil Conway will be one of the stars at this weekend's CIS hockey championship in Thunder Bay. The St. Mary's University netminder's .936 save percentage is best so far during the university league's playoffs. He is one of two former Stouffville players in the tournament. The other is Dan Speer, who plays for Thunder Bay's Lakehead University.

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