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Stouffville Spirit forward Robbie Acton tips a shot in front of Mississauga Chargers goaltender Jonathon Loparco during Stouffville's 10-1 win in Ontario Junior Hockey League action Saturday at Malton Arena.

Seven-game win streak has coach talking proud

LAST WEEK: Friday: Stouffville Spirit 5 vs. Huntsville Otters 4 shootout. Saturday: Stouffville Spirit 10 vs. Mississauga Chargers 1. Spirit record: 20 wins, two overtime wins, one shootout win, 10 losses, two shootout loss, three overtime losses, 53 points. Third place in North Division, Ontario Junior Hockey League.

COMING UP: Today: Mississauga Chargers vs. Spirit at Stouffville Arena, 7:40 p.m. Friday: Spirit at Collingwood Blackhawks, 8 p.m. Sunday: Orangeville Flyers vs. Spirit at Stouffville Arena, 2:10 p.m.

GAME NOTES: Stouffville Spirit head coach Craig Donovan couldn't be happier with the way his Ontario Junior Hockey League club has performed of late. And with good reason. Especially since the Spirit skated off with two victories last weekend to extend their winning streak to seven games.

Travelling to Huntsville Friday, the Spirit spotted the host Otters a 2-0 lead early in the opening period before countering with goals from Matt Neal and Tyler Ferry to even the count. After the Otters scored to regain the upper hand through 20 minutes, the Spirit tied the game just 73 seconds into the second period on a goal by Christian Finch. But with just under two minutes remaining in the period, the Otters scored to take a 4-3 lead entering the final 20 minutes. Capitalizing on a power-play opportunity in the early going of the third period, the Spirit took advantage of that situation when Neal deposited his second goal of the game to tie the game. After a scoreless five-minute sudden-death period, the contest went to a shootout. While Drake Caggula and Neal each scored on their opportunities, net-minder Mike Sheremeta closed the door on Otters' shooters Greg Gibson and Tyler Fawcett to enable the Spirit to gain the valued extra point in a 5-4 win. The Spirit outshot the Otters 37-23.

The momentum carried over the following day when the Spirit took to the road for a game with the Mississauga Chargers and cruised to a 10-1 win. The Spirit took a 3-1 lead after one period and padded it to 7-1

through two. Neal, with a shorthanded and power-play marker, and Andrew Doyle each scored a pair of goals to ignite the Spirit offence. Caggula, Finch and Blake Stephenson, each on power play efforts, Kory Kennedy and Tyler Ferry added singles to round out the scoring. The Spirit outshot the Chargers 43-22.

INSIDER: In the National Hockey League's Central Scouting Bureau's recent mid-term report, Spirit defenceman Brennan Serville was ranked 145th among North American skaters. The Minnesota Wild will host this year's NHL entry draft June 24 and 25.

GENERALLY SPEAKING: "I'm absolutely happy with the way we've been playing of late," Donovan said. "We want to be playing our best hockey as the season ends and we're getting close to it."

In accounting for the club's recent success, Donovan felt it was a case of being patient with his roster that's relatively young in nature.

"We have a lot of first-year players who have played a lot of minutes and they're getting better as the season progresses," he said. "These guys might have made a lot of mistakes at the start of year, but they're making far fewer now."

As well, Donovan was quick to note they've been getting big plays from their returning veterans.

"Our veteran players are now our best players. Guys like Matt Neal and Tyler (von Engelbrechten) are starting to dominate games," Donovan said.

In combining these factors, Donovan said it's made a big difference with the club they had a year ago with the one they now have.

"Last year our go-to guys were young and they struggled to score. Now if we're in a situation when we're behind like we were against Huntsville on Friday (down 2-0 in the first period) we know we can catch up. Last year if we were down 2-0, we knew it would be tough for us to get even," he said.

- Michael Hayakawa

Spirit nets goalie, sniper

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On buying players, Stouffville Spirit co-owner and general manager Ken Burrows acknowledged he's traditionally conservative.

But with the Spirit playing its best hockey of the season and riding a seven-game winning streak, Burrows felt he could be a little more liberal in his spending ways when the Ontario Junior Hockey League trade deadline concluded at midnight Monday.

To bolster their roster for the regular season and hoping to extend play well into late winter and early spring, Burrows acquired two players at the deadline in cash deals.

The new players are goalie Jon Hall from the Collingwood Blackhawks and forward Justin MacDonald from the Pickering Panthers.

"I thought we did pretty good," Burrows said. "I talked with our co-

owners (Zeev Werek, Chris Tambos and Steve Roest) and I told them we needed depth and they said 'go for it.'

"I spent a little more money than I usually do at this time of the year. But our other owners went for it. We've been playing some pretty good hockey lately. Hopefully these deals will lead to something bigger (a league title).

"It sure is fun to say that."

The Spirit went goalie shopping after being informed they won't have Dalton McGrath back for the rest of this season as the Niagara Ice Dogs of the Ontario Hockey League intend to keep him on their roster.

While rookie Mike Sheremeta has performed well during McGrath's absence, Burrows said they needed insurance in the form of a proven netminder.

Burrows said Hall's name surfaced rather suddenly.

"I had three deals going for a

goalie and it just happened that Hall fell into my lap," Burrows said. "I didn't know I was getting Hall until late in the day."

A Watertown, N.Y., native, the 19-year-old Hall has faced plenty of rubber this season. Despite fielding a 6.25 goals against average in 29 games, the six-foot, four-inch, 210-pound Hall has recorded 1,060 saves and a .870 save percentage.

"He's faced plenty of shots," Burrows said. "But he's a big goalie who fills the net and he can compete."

Making Hall even more attractive he can return to the Spirit next season.

A 20-year-old Newmarket native, MacDonald was Pickering's leading scorer with 14 goals and 23 assists in 36 regular season games.

"He can play both ends of the rink. He's a tough kid," Burrows said. "He can be a point-a-game guy and he's a top-end player — a top eight or nine forward."



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