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Spirit sniper nears league lead

BY MICHAEL HAYAKAWA
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During the early stages of Ontario Junior Hockey League regular season, Stouffville Spirit forward Matt Neal was nowhere to be found among the overall scoring leaders.

But with the regular season winding down, the 19-year-old Barrie native has vaulted his way into elite company.

31 POINTS IN LAST NINE GAMES

In 42 games, the Spirit's leading point getter was ranked third in the overall scoring race with 35 goals and 46 assists.

Currently in his third season with the Spirit, Neal acknowledged he's far surpassed his initial expectations in which he had set a target of attaining 70 to 75 points.

In fact, if someone had told him prior to the start of the season he would be in the hunt for the league's individual scoring title, he would have scoffed at such a notion.

"I would have said 'you're crazy,'" he said. "Right now though, I'm surprised at the point of where I'm at."

In explaining the torrid pace he's been on, which includes a stretch in which he amassed a whopping 31 points over the last nine games and of which he recorded more than one point in eight of those tilts, Neal attributed it to several factors.

Foremost, he said, has been the good fortune in playing on a line that includes Christian Finch, the club's second-leading scorer, and recently acquired Tyler von Engelbrechten, who ranks third in team scoring.

"Christian's a great passer," Neal said of Finch, a converted defenceman, "and Tyler's

real good down low. To get him was big for us."

Neal also felt the experience accrued since the time when he first joined the Spirit two seasons ago has bolstered his confidence.

"It definitely helps," he said. "In the first year you don't really get to play much and in the second year you tend to play a little more and in the third year, you get a lot more opportunity to play."

Electing earlier in the year to accept a scholarship offer to attend Rensselaer Polytechnical Institute in Troy, N.Y. this fall, Neal said that career-altering decision has also enhanced his performance of late.

"That was huge, I could fall asleep at night," he said. "It wasn't so much the choice of going to school, but a matter of picking what school to attend. That took a lot of weight off of my shoulders."

What Neal has accomplished so far this season did not come as a total surprise to Spirit head coach Craig Donovan.

SCHOLARSHIP TO RPI

"Matt's work on the whole is pretty good. He has a great shot and great hands and he wants to be a player at the next level. It shows the quality of a player that he is. With Matt being a third-year player, you expect him to lead the team and he's consistently put up points."

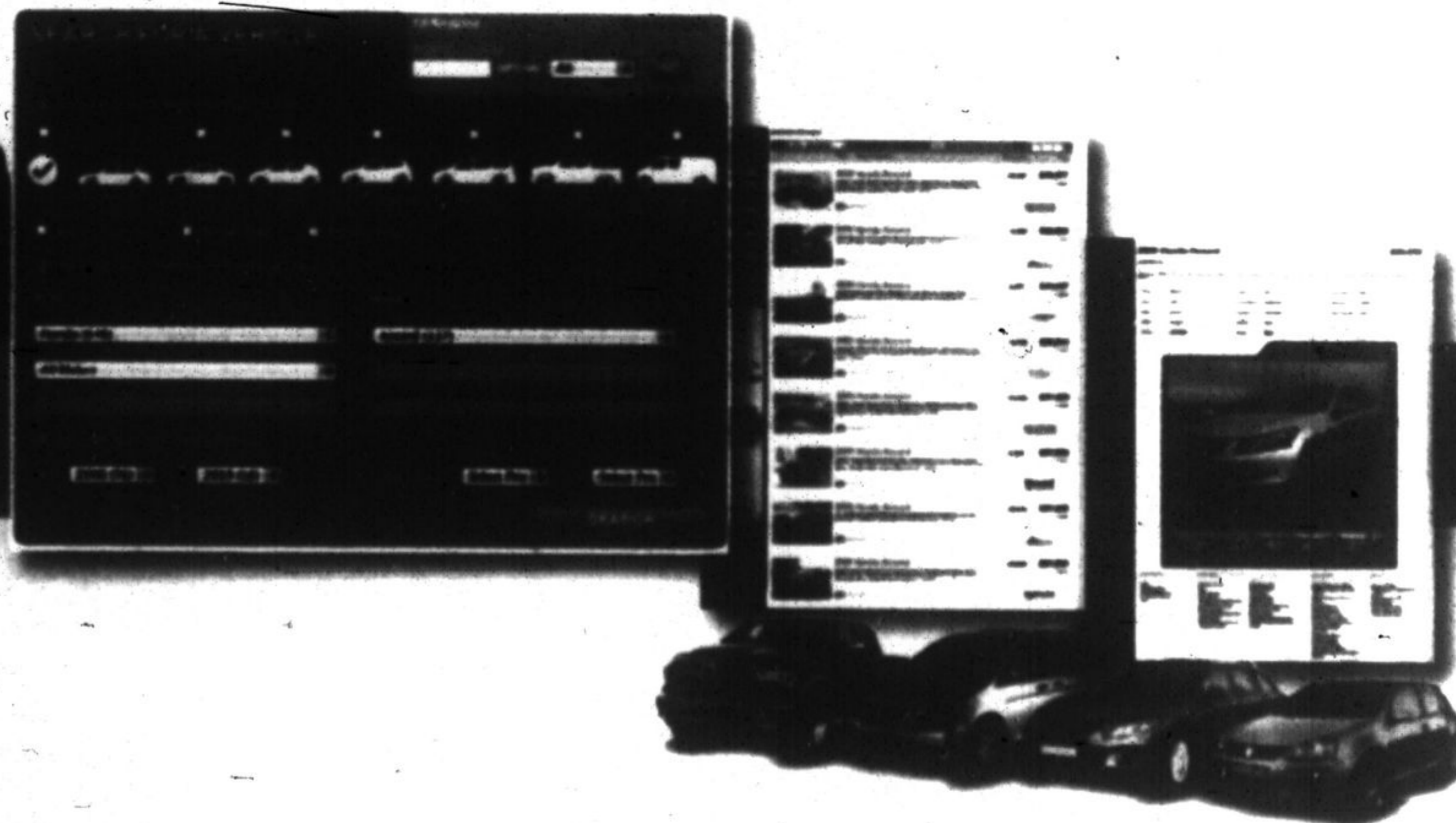
"We hope it continues well into the play-offs."

The Spirit hosts the Markham Waxers tomorrow at 2:10 p.m. at the Stouffville Arena. The Spirit is chasing the Waxers for second place in the North Conference.



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