

# SPORTS

## Finch flying since leaving blueline

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When Christian Finch was informed by Stouffville Spirit general manager Ken Burrows and head coach Craig Donovan he would be shifted from defence to forward prior to the start of this Ontario Junior Hockey League regular season, he was a tad hesitant.

Entering his second season with the Spirit, the 19-year-old, six-foot, 180-pound Unionville resident has always been on the blueline, going back to his first organized game at the age of three.

### CHEMISTRY LESSON

But when duty called, Finch answered the bell.

Looking back on that moment, Finch has no regrets. Neither does the Spirit's braintrust.

With the Spirit playing some of their best hockey in recent days, including a nine-game winning streak, and with the regular season winding down, Finch's performance up front has been a major factor in the club's surge to where they're challenging the Markham Waxers for second place in the North Division standings.

In 44 games this season, Finch is the club's second-leading scorer with 24 goals and 48 assists.

Those numbers are rapidly approaching a target of 75 points he set prior to season.

"It's sure turned out for the better," Finch said.

"At first I was kind of hesitant to do it because I played on defence

for the last little while.

"I wasn't sure of the move. But our general manager thought the move to play forward would be good and I told them I'd give it a try."

The hockey staff saw chemistry developing when Finch skated alongside Neal during weekly skates last summer.

"As a defenceman, my skill set is on offence in the way I see the ice," said Finch.

While Finch started the season on a line with Neal and Andrew Doyle, he said their unit became more potent with the arrival of Tyler von Engelbrechten from the Pickering Panthers Dec. 8.

"Tyler is a pure goal scorer and that's what we needed on our line," Finch said. "Matt (Neal) and myself could move the puck and Matt also has a good scoring touch and he's quick. That's why we work well together."

### COLLEGE DREAMS

The numbers Finch has compiled so far this season couldn't come at a more opportune moment as he hopes to earn a collegiate scholarship at a Division One program in the U.S.

While taking part-time courses at York University after graduating last year from St. Augustine Catholic High School in Unionville, Finch has had preliminary discussions with U.S. recruiters.

"I've talked to about four or five schools and they're just waiting to see us when the playoffs start," he said.



STAFF PHOTO/NICK IWANYSHYN

Markham Waxers defenceman Jeremy Hepler races for the puck with Stouffville Spirit forward Matt Neal as Spirit winger Christian Finch breaks for a pass during the Spirit's 6-2 Jr. A win at the Stouffville Arena Sunday.

## Spirited race for second tightens up

tilt with Aurora tonight.

The Spirit has recorded at least a point in their last 12 games, dating back to Dec. 17. Their only loss during that span came in overtime, 2-1 to Orangeville Jan. 16.

The Spirit has six games left, including dates with last-place Collingwood tomorrow in Collingwood and Sunday at 2:10 p.m. in Stouffville.

First-place Newmarket, the top team in the 31-team league, has 74 points. Markham has 64 and Stouffville 62. Huntsville is fourth with 50 points.

The top three teams in each divi-

sion receive first-round byes when the playoffs open in mid-February.

On Sunday, the Spirit held period leads of 3-2 and 5-2 and outshot the Waxers 49-34. Other Spirit scorers were ex-Waxer Jack Caradonna and Chris Porter.

Matt Neal had three assists to move to second place in the league scoring race. Neal has 87 points to the 89 of Burlington's Phil Brewer.

The Spirit defeated the Orangeville Flyers 5-2 in Orangeville Saturday.

Finch had two goals, Neal a goal and two assists and linemate von Engelbrechten three assists. Porter and Caradonna had the other goals.



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