

SPORTS: Markham leads Jr. A playoff series 2-1

# Spirit hopes bounces go their way at home tonight

**LAST WEEK:** Friday (Game-1): Markham Waxers 6 vs. Stouffville Spirit 2. Sunday (Game 2): Spirit 5 vs. Markham Waxers 3. Monday (Game 3): Markham Waxers 3 vs. Stouffville Spirit 2 (overtime). Waxers lead best-of-seven second round series two games to one.

**COMING UP:** Today (Game 4) at Stouffville Arena, 7:30 p.m., Whistle Radio Friday (Game 5) at Markham Centennial, 7:30 p.m. Sunday (sixth game if necessary) at Stouffville Arena, 2:10 p.m. March 4 (seventh game if necessary) at Markham Centennial, 7:30 p.m.

**GAME NOTES:** With the Stouffville Spirit and Markham Waxers mirroring each other after finishing their regular season with 72 points apiece and in a virtual tie for second place in the Ontario Junior Hockey League's North Division standings, Spirit head coach Craig Donovan expected nothing less than a closely contested series when the two clubs began their second round best-of-seven affair. Taking away last Friday's opener, which the host Waxers won rather handily 6-2, Donovan's prognostication appears to be right on target after the Spirit battled back to even the series with a 5-3 win at the Stouffville Arena Sunday.

Returning to Markham Centennial Arena for the third game Monday before a gathering

of some 750 onlookers on Family Day, the two clubs battled into overtime before the Waxers prevailed 3-2 to take a two games to one lead in the series. After a scoreless first period, the Waxers scored the game's first goal before the Spirit tied the game just 56 seconds later on a goal by Adam Vandersluis. But the Waxers responded with a goal just 61 seconds later to regain the upper hand entering the third period. Pressing for the equalizer during the final 20 minutes paid off for the Spirit when Declan Gunovski lit the red light with just under six minutes remaining in regulation time to tie the game and set the stage for overtime. A goal by Tyler Kotlarz just over five minutes into the extra session won the game for the Waxers. The Spirit had the edge in shots 43-34.

In Friday's opener, the Waxers led from the onset, nursing a 1-0 lead through 20 minutes and 3-1 through two periods. Gunovski, on a power-play effort, and Paul Geiger each scored once for the Spirit. The Spirit held the edge in shots 38-33.

In Sunday's second game that was witnessed by 517 onlookers at the Stouffville Arena, the Spirit received a big game from Justin MacDonald, who recorded the hat trick in a 5-3 win that evened the series. After a scoreless first period, MacDonald

scored the game's first two goals that put the Spirit up 2-0 near the midway mark of the second period. After the Waxers scored just past the midway point to cut their deficit, the Spirit countered with a goal by Christian Finch and one late in the frame from Tyler vonEngelbrechten to take a 4-1 lead entering the final period. The Waxers though, battled back with a pair of unanswered goals to get back to within one late in the game before MacDonald iced the game with an empty net goal with just 12 seconds remaining in the tilt. The Spirit outshot the Waxers 35-32.

**INSIDER:** After being named the Ontario Junior Hockey League's Player of the Month for January and chosen to the North-West Conference's first all-star team, Matt Neal was named the league's most improved player Monday. The Barrie native, who also serves as an alternate captain with the Spirit, has seen a steady improvement since joining the Spirit three years ago. As a 17-year old rookie in 2008-09, he recorded 31 points to finish fifth in club scoring. Last season, he led the Spirit with 21 goals and 47 points. This season, Neal continued to exhibit progress as he improved his point total by 53 after compiling 40 goals and 60 assists to lead the club in scoring again. Not only did his

totals lead the club, he finished fourth overall in league scoring, while finishing fifth in goal scoring and tied for second in assists. A force on special teams, Neal notched 10 power-play goals, while recording the league's second-best total of 25 power-play assists for the league's fourth best club with the man advantage. Of his goal total, eight were game-winners, tied for the third best total in the league, helping the club to a .720 winning percentage and third place in the West Division. Neal has accepted a full four-year scholarship to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, playing for the Engineers beginning with the 2011-12 ECAC season. The selection was conducted by the league's general managers.

**GENERALLY SPEAKING:** "You've got two teams that each had 72 points so you expect the two teams to be fairly evenly matched," Donovan said of the series thus far. "I thought Markham might have controlled the early part of Monday's game, but then we took over in the second half and kept them (Markham) in their zone. We felt comfortable, but we made one mistake at the blueline in overtime and it cost us."

Donovan acknowledged his club appeared to be a little tentative in last Friday's opener. In no way did he feel his club was overconfident after having defeated Markham

in their last three regular season meetings. "I thought we just played a little nervous and made some uncharacteristic mistakes," he said.

But in Sunday's second game, he felt his club reverted to playing the way they did during the stretch run of the regular season. The key, he felt, was their ability to generate offence from more than just one line. In particular, the line which MacDonald was on. He helped set the tone by scoring the game's first two goals netting an empty-net insurance marker.

"We have three lines that can score and I'm comfortable with any of the three that I put out there that one of them can pick up the slack," he said.

Donovan doesn't expect to make any changes tonight.

"We had a nice run to finish the year and we've played the way we wanted to play, which included a couple of wins against Markham. We won't change too much. We just hope for a few better bounces of the puck and we're coming home. We didn't expect this series to be easy," he said.

For more on the Spirit, go to: stouffville-spirit.com or on Twitter at @SpiritJrA

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**Watson O.T. hero for Clippers in opener of OMHA semifinal series**

Nathan Watson's goal at the 9:13-mark of overtime propelled the Stouffville minor bantam Clippers to a 3-2 overtime win over the Uxbridge Stars in the first game of their best-of-five or first-to-six-point Ontario Minor Hockey Association A-level semifinal series at the Stouffville Arena Tuesday.

After a scoreless first period, the Stars scored the game's first goal just past the midway point. With the Stars adding another goal to pad their advantage to 2-0, the Clippers whittled their deficit on a goal by Jordan Brillinger late in the period.

Trailing 2-1 in the third period, the Clippers battled back to tie the game near the midway mark on a goal by Duncan Allen.

That set the stage for Watson's heroics in the extra session that handed the Stars their first loss since Nov. 28. Jeremy Hughes collected two assists while Taylor Peterson, Nick Rabito and Mitch Witherspoon had one each.

Helping to keep the Clippers in contention was some outstanding work by goalkeeper Andre Ward.

The series will resume in Uxbridge Saturday. The minor bantams are one of three Stouffville teams in the OMHA semifinals.

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