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HAVING A BALL

Stouffville Spartan Steph Doxtater (23) is defended by Unionville Wolf W. Zhu in senior girls high school basketball action at Stouffville District Secondary School Tuesday. The Wolves won 31-23. Tier 2 playoffs open Monday. For more information, go to yraa.com

SPORTS: Waxers visit Stouffville Sunday

Spirit has holes on defence

BY MICHAEL HAYAKAWA
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The Stouffville Spirit are faced with a dilemma.

But it's one the Ontario Junior Hockey League club knows is only short term and can be solved for the time being.

Playing back-to-back games against the Markham Waxers, including one at the Stouffville Arena Sunday at 2:30 p.m., the Spirit will have a void on defence.

Veteran Paul Geiger is in Langley, B.C., as a member of the Team Canada East squad preparing for this week's 2011 World Junior A Challenge.

Earlier in the week, the Spirit were a bit surprised when rookie defenceman Cole Hutchinson left the club to join the Gatineau Olympiques of the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League.

"It caught us a little off guard," head coach Craig Donovan said. "For (Gatineau) to come for Cole midway through our season was a surprise. He was playing well for us.

"Sure, our goal is to try and help players go to a higher competitive level. But it would have been nice if this happened at the start of the year rather than in the middle."

The Spirit defence was further reduced after it released rookie Joseph Lamanna.

Donovan said Lamanna still needed to refine his game, particularly when he didn't have the puck.

"There's no doubt we're a little thin on defence, right now we're in a bit of a bind," he said.

One short-term solution will be to bring

back Blake Stephenson on a temporary basis.

A member of the Spirit last season, the 18-year-old Barrie native elected to play this season with the Alliston Hornets Junior C club due to his heavy educational workload.

"Blake is a player who can definitely play at our level," Donovan said.

Another option Donovan is weighing is to employ some of his forwards who at one time were defencemen.

"Christian (Finch) played on defence when he came here and so has Alex Botten and Robbie Acton," said Donovan.

What has been a blessing for the Spirit was the recent addition of Josh Chapman after playing last season between the Sarnia Sting of the Ontario Hockey League and Sarnia Legionaires Junior B club.

"He's been good for us," Donovan said of Chapman. "He's definitely made us stronger defensively when the opposing teams try to cycle the puck and he's even scored some goals for us (two goals and four assists in three games). Thank goodness he fell into our lap when he did."

While the Spirit are a little shy at the moment on defence, Donovan was quick to point out they aren't the only team facing that situation.

All teams in the league, he said, welcome an experienced defenceman with open arms.

"They are a valuable commodity, to find someone who can step in and handle the speed of the game at our level," he said. "At this level there's little chance to get on-the-job training."

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