



JAMES MIRABELLI PHOTO

Soo Thunderbird Jake Wright beats Stouffville Spirit goalie Jon Hall during the Soo's 5-3 win in the Dudley Hewitt Cup championship game in Thunder Bay Saturday night.

Spirit savors defying odds

From page 1.

did not come as a total surprise to team members

"I expected to compete with the good teams. It's not like I'm dreaming it was impossible. But I'm not surprised that we did well. We played some pretty good hockey," said Spirit co-owner and general manager Kenny Burrows.

What Burrows will remember most from this past season wasn't so much what happened in their league final series-ending victory over the Fury, which saw the Spirit score two goals in the waning seconds to tie the game at 3-3 and set the stage for Brandon Gaudette's dramatic game-winning goal in the first sudden-death overtime period.

Among the biggest highlights for Burrows was seeing defenceman Paul Geiger score the game-winning goal in the seventh and deciding game against the host Georgetown Raiders in the North-West Conference semifinal that enabled the Spirit to gain a berth in the final.

This, after the Spirit trailed the best-of-seven series three games to two.

As well, Burrows has fond memories of his club's victory over the archrival Newmarket Hurricanes in which they overcame a three-games-to-two deficit to win the seventh and deciding game over them for a second straight year, both times in Newmarket.

"Everybody shouldn't kid themselves; that Newmarket team we beat was good and we had to play really well to beat them," he cited.

Burrows is proud of the resolve and character displayed by his team.

Especially when the club missed the services of their leading regular season scorer and league MVP, Christian Finch, and the versatile Marko Breljih, both due to concussions, during the league semifinal and final series, along with the Dudley Hewitt Cup tourney.

"It was incredible what happened. The kids gutted games out, they outworked every team we played," he said. "It just showed the leadership that we had when different situations arose. You learn a lot about your team under those situations."

'PROVED PEOPLE WRONG'

You won't get any arguments from Spirit head coach Craig Donovan about this season being the most memorable during his time behind the bench.

Far more than when he was an assistant coach with a Newmarket Hurricanes club that went to the RBC Cup in 1996.

"That year (with the Hurricanes) we were a team expected to be there (at the RBC Cup). We had all the key pieces back and got players from the Barrie tier two Jr. A team that folded.

"But this team, if you read the (online)

forum page at the start of the season, we were picked to be near the bottom of the North Conference. To win a league title when nobody expected you to win, to overachieve, that's the most rewarding," he said.

What Donovan will remember most about the 2011-12 edition of the Spirit was the leadership from his players, including captain Andrew Doyle and Geiger.

"I could name a lot of names, but those two guys were the reason why this team didn't quit."

Donovan said what's etched most in his memory is seeing the smile on Doyle's face after he received the league's Buckland Cup trophy from league commissioner Marty Savoy and Ontario Hockey Association president Brent Ladds when the Spirit defeated the Fury in the sixth game.

CHAMPIONSHIP SMILE

"To watch Andrew develop as a player over the three years he's been with the club and all the effort he put in this past year, starting last summer, was great to see. He's a real warrior."

Over to the players.

"It was a great season, we had a great run, it was an amazing group of guys that we had on this team," Geiger said.

"To lose in the Dudley Hewitt Cup final though, that's the way it goes. We knew we were a better team, but stuff didn't go our way in a one-game showdown.

"But we'll remember this season for the rest of our lives," he said.

Geiger was named the league's top defenceman and chosen to play for the Canada East squad at the 2011 World Junior A Challenge. He also earned a scholarship to Clarkson University starting this fall.

Geiger knows many predicted the Spirit wouldn't get as far as they did a year ago when it lost to Wellington in the league semifinals then lost several key players to graduation.

"A lot of guys stepped up, we proved people wrong," he said.

Doyle also has fond memories of this past year, especially winning the Buckland Cup.

"To go through four rounds to win the league title, we played something like 28 games in 52 days. That's almost one game every other day, the fans were great, even when we were on the road they were there to support us. To win with a great group of guys who you're seeing almost every day there's that feeling that we did it," he said.

About 60 fans made the trip to Thunder Bay, double what the Soo team had, team officials said.

For Doyle, that euphoric feeling was extra special to do it as team captain.

"To be named captain and to win the cup was a huge honour," he said. "It's something I'll never forget, for sure."

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