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Spirited fight for playoffs on tonight

LAST WEEK: Monday: Cobourg Cougars 4 vs. Stouffville Spirit 1 Sunday: Whitby Fury 3 vs. Stouffville Spirit 2 Friday: Stouffville Spirit 4 vs. Lindsay Muskies 3 (shootout). Spirit record: 10 wins, two overtime wins, four shootout wins, one shootout loss, five overtime losses, 24 losses, 38 points. Fourth place in North Division of Ontario Junior Hockey League, five points behind Cobourg Cougars (41 points) for eighth and final playoff spot in North-East Conference

COMING UP: Today: vs. Cobourg Cougars at Stouffville Arena, 7:30 p.m. Friday: at Aurora Tigers, 7:30 p.m.

GAME NOTES: Jeff Perrin has no qualms about the effort his youthful Stouffville Spirit charges are putting forth. But playing four games in five days that concluded Monday with a 4-1 road loss against the Cobourg Cougars, fatigue began to take its toll. When that happens, mental mistakes surface and the Spirit committed a couple on the power play that resulted in two shorthanded goals from the Cougars. Michael Morgan scored the lone Spirit goal late in the third period when goalkeeper Daniel Mannella was pulled in favour of an extra attacker. (The Cougars moved five points up on the Spirit for the eighth and final playoff spot in the North-East Conference with a 4-1 win in Lindsay Tuesday.)

The loss came on the heels of a 3-2 setback against the Whitby Fury in Whitby Sunday afternoon. A slow start hurt the Spirit as the Fury built up a 2-0 lead through the opening 40 minutes. In the third period, the Spirit cut the deficit in half on a powerplay goal by Joseph Devery. But seven seconds later, the Spirit's Marc Stevens took a roughing penalty that the Fury capitalized on 11 seconds later to restore the two-goal margin. The Spirit battled back just 34 seconds later to get to within a goal when Stefan vonEngelbrechten scored. The Spirit defeated the Fury in last year's OJHL final.

The Spirit defeated the Lindsay Muskies 4-3 in a shootout in Lindsay Friday. Morgan and Michael Stevens each scored during a shootout session and Mannella stopped four of five shots to give Stouffville the extra point and snap a six-game losing streak. After the Muskies drew first blood near the midway point of the first period on a power-play goal by William Pelletier, the Spirit countered with a power play goal of its own from vonEngelbrechten and an even-strength marker from Daryl Thomson to take a 2-1 lead into the dressing room. Thomson, a Stouffville resident acquired from Welland at mid-season, scored his second goal of the game and accounted for the lone scoring in the second period to stake the Spirit to a 3-1 lead. But the Muskies stormed back, tying the game with five seconds remaining in regulation time.

INSIDER: The Spirit has gone 2-11 since Dec. 20. It has nine games left before the regular season ends Feb. 21.

Spirit captain Matt Heffernan missed Monday's game after incurring an upper body injury Sunday. Heffernan is day to day. The return of forward Corey DeRose also remains uncertain, added Perrin.

Several graduates of the Spirit had big outings for collegiate teams south of the border. Forward Drake Caggula scored a goal in the University of North Dakota's 4-4 tie against the University of Minnesota in their Western Collegiate Hockey Association game in St. Paul, Minn. Saturday. Caggula has six goals and six assists in 24 games in his freshman season. In ECAC Hockey action, forward Matt Neal collected a pair of assists in RPI's 3-2 win over visiting Cornell University Saturday. Neal had an assist in RPI's 2-1 win over visiting Colgate University Friday. Neal is RPI's third-leading scorer with four goals and 12 assists in 20 games. Stouffville resident Chris Porter collected a pair of assists in American International's 5-4 loss to Robert Morris Saturday. The freshman has four goals and six assists in 20 games. He is AIC's fifth-leading scorer.

GENERALLY SPEAKING: "I can't blame the effort the guys have given, they've never quit," Perrin said. "But playing our fourth game in five nights Monday, we got fatigued and when that happens, the first thing that goes is your mind and then you begin to make mental mistakes and that's what we did."

"Cobourg hadn't played since last Thursday and we were behind the eight ball even before the game started. But there's not much you can do about that."

While the Spirit trail the Cougars by three points for the eighth and final playoff spot in the North-East Conference, there's an opportunity for redemption as the two clubs will meet twice more. Among those games is one tonight at the Stouffville Arena.

"We've got to be better on our power play," Perrin said. "All of the shots that we took from the point when we were on the power play were blocked. We've got to be smarter with the puck."

The Spirit visits the Aurora Tigers, who are battling the Newmarket Hurricanes for first place in the North, tomorrow.

"We've had some success against Aurora earlier this year," Perrin said. "These next few games are big for us. They could make or break us."

Michael Hayakawa

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The Stouffville Spirit's Dakota Redshaw leads a rush during OJHL action in Whitby Sunday. The Spirit lost 3-2. Cobourg visits the Stouffville Arena tonight.

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