

JR. A NOTEBOOK: Point out of playoffs and home tonight

Spirit has tough stretch after bowing to Buffalo

LAST WEEK: Sunday: Buffalo Jr. Sabres 5 vs. Stouffville Spirit 4 (shootout). Spirit record: 13 wins, one overtime win, one shootout win, one overtime loss, three shootout losses, 17 losses, 34 points. Fourth place in North Division, Ontario Junior Hockey League.

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

GAME NOTES: Long-time Stouffville Spirit fans couldn't remember a home game quite like it. The Spirit hopped out to a 2-0 lead over the Buffalo Jr. Sabres 1:03 into their OJHL game at the Stouffville Arena Sunday afternoon. They extended the gap to 4-0 by the 5:05 mark. Blowout, right? Wrong. That was all the scoring the Spirit would do. The Sabres, coached by ex-NHLer Michael Pecca, must have developed some serious bus legs on the QEW en route to the Stouffville Arena earlier that day. They shook them off after the first intermission, outshooting the Spirit 32-20 during the last two periods and sending the game to overtime, and eventually a shootout, by scoring three times in the second period and once in the third. Each team used six shooters in the shootout, with the Sabres outscoring the Spirit 3-2. In regulation, Joe Deveny, Michael Morgan, Michael Carcone and Graham Pickard scored for Stouffville. Despite the loss, which snapped a season-best three-game winning streak, the Spirit earned a point to move to within one point of the Newmarket Hurricanes who hold down the final playoff spot in the OJHL's North-East. The Spirit has two games in hand.

INSIDER: With the league's trade deadline last Friday now history, the Spirit did not make any transactions.

The Spirit's game in Newmarket Dec. 22 that was postponed during the ice storm has been rescheduled for Feb. 4 at the Ray Twinney Recreation Complex.

Former Spirit forward Christian Finch made an auspicious debut as a member of the University of Toronto Varsity Blues men's hockey team after he netted the game winner in a 4-3 victory Sunday over the visiting University of Windsor Lancers. Finch transferred to the University of Toronto this year after attending Clarkson University last year. Two other former Spirit members in Tyler von Engelbrechten and Andrew Doyle got their names on the scoresheet in the Varsity Blues' 3-2 road win over Wilfrid Laurier University last Thursday. Von Engelbrechten scored the game's first two goals while Doyle collected one assist. The two

victories propel the Blues (11-7-2) past the fourth place Lancers and into a tie for third in the Ontario University Athletics West Division. Former Spirit defenceman Paul Geiger scored a power play goal in the opening period to propel Clarkson University to a 3-2 win over Merrimack College in Potsdam, N.Y., Friday. Former Spirit forward Matt Neal netted a first period power play goal for Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in a 6-2 road loss Saturday to seventh-ranked Quinnipiac University. Stouffville resident and former Spirit forward Chris Porter earned an assist on American International College's first goal in their 6-2 road win Friday over Niagara University.

GENERALLY SPEAKING: "It was a tough loss, but these things happen," said Spirit captain and veteran defenceman Matt Heffernan. "We got up early and I think they (Buffalo) was kind of sleeping, then all of a sudden they come on in the second period and were refocused.

"I don't think we were playing bad but we got away from our game plan a bit and they began to capitalize. It was 4-2 with around two minutes left in the second period and I thought we were doing all right. We still had momentum but they got a call in their favour (a questionable goaltender interference call against Peyton Backus), they got on the power play and capitalized and it was 4-3 and that made it a whole new game.

"I thought we played a solid third period but they capitalized on a chance midway through to tie the game.

"It was a good game. At the end of the day, a point is a point. We can't afford to dwell on giving up a four-goal lead. Buffalo is a good team."

Heffernan hopes the club will learn from that experience having never being in that situation before this season.

They will have to as the Spirit will be put to the test in facing teams playing above the .500 mark and appear to be playoff bound in the Whitby Fury tonight at the Stouffville Arena before taking to the road for tilts against the North Division-leading Aurora Tigers Friday and Cobourg Cougars Monday.

"We've definitely got three tough games, but I feel we're up to the task. I think we're in a groove now and especially since early December where we've won six and lost two in shootouts. We won our first three games to start 2014 and we hope to get back on track."

-Michael Hayakawa with Jim Mason



STAFF PHOTO/NICK IWANYSHYN

Buffalo Jr. Sabres defender Nick Desimone lays a hit on Stouffville Spirit forward Spencer Roberts during Ontario Junior Hockey League action at the Stouffville Arena Sunday. The Spirit hosts Whitby tonight.

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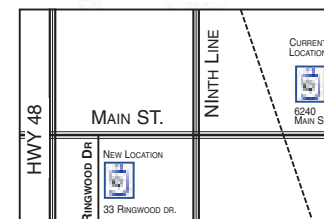
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