

Spirit season on the line in Markham Friday



OJHL IMAGES/ANDY CORNEAU

Sam Hu of the Stouffville Spirit skates with the puck during the second overtime of the Spirit's 2-2 tie with Aurora at the Stouffville Arena Saturday.

LAST WEEK: Thursday: Stouffville Spirit 2, Newmarket Hurricanes 2, 2OT. Friday: Spirit 3 vs. Wellington Dukes 5. Saturday: Spirit 2 vs. Aurora Tigers 2, 2OT. Spirit record: 24-23-3-3, fourth place North Division and ninth overall in North-East Conference, Ontario Junior Hockey League.

COMING UP: Friday: vs. Markham Royals at Markham Centennial arena, 7:30 p.m. End of regular season.

It all comes down to tomorrow night. Or maybe it doesn't.

The Stouffville Spirit concludes its OJHL regular season Friday in Markham.

A win and they're in the OJHL playoffs. A loss and they aren't. If they get one point, via a tie or overtime loss, the Spirit will face the Newmarket Hurricanes in a play-in game. Newmarket lost its final game, 3-2 in overtime in Cobourg Monday, to move a point up on the Spirit.

A win by the Spirit and a loss by the Whitby Fury tomorrow would vault Stouffville into seventh place and a first-round series with Markham or Aurora.

Nathan Hudgin's team-leading 27th goal sent the Spirit's final home game into overtime Saturday. Two extra periods with the Aurora Tigers would solve nothing. Stouffville native Jackson Savery had the other goal for the Spirit, which was outshot 35-25. Goaltenders Aaron Taylor of Stouffville and Aurora's Joshua Boyko made several spectacular saves. Boyko was especially good in overtime.

On Friday in Wellington, the Spirit jumped out to a 3-0 lead about halfway through the first period, before giving up five unanswered goals, including an empty-netter, and falling 5-3. Taylor faced 42 shots.

On Thursday in Newmarket, it was another 2-2 double-overtime tie. Rookies Jack Varga and Alex Williamson scored for the Spirit.

INSIDER: Saturday's contest was the fifth overtime game for the Spirit during the past two weeks. It was their fifth game in eight days.

The Spirit has lost once in their last nine games.

Markham would capture the North Division with a win tomorrow night. A loss by second-place Aurora in either of its two weekend games would work, too. The Royals feature three former Spirit players, Tyson Bruce, Matthew Dunlop and Nick Thomakos.

Spirit alum Will Acton is second in scoring in Germany's top league, the Deutsche Eishockey Liga. The former Edmonton Oiler has 15 goals and 37 assists in 40 games for the struggling Schwenninger Wild Wings.

Spirit grad Chris Porter, the captain of American International, sets a new school standard for games played with 140 at the West Springfield, Mass., NCAA Division 1 university Friday.

GENERALLY SPEAKING: "It's just going to come down to who wants it the most. ... Hopefully we'll want it the most on Friday," said Spirit head coach Jeff Perrin.

"It will be a tough one (to lose) because the last couple of weeks (our players) stepped up and have shown they want to get into the playoffs."

"We've got one last chance and hopefully we get there."

"The last 10 games have been must-wins," he said. "The last few weeks it's been pretty intense and a lot of fun. One game out of 64 to get into the playoffs."

Over to the Markham bench.

"I hate to go in through the back door," said Royals' coach/GM and former Stouffville resident Mike Galati on winning the division. "Our goal is to win it ourselves (Friday)."

- Sandra Bolan and Michael Hayakawa

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