

CWG boys hockey win silver at Richmond tourney

By Jonathan Russell on January 4, 2011 at 3:14 pm

Solid defensive-zone coverage. Patience. Timely goals.

All three attributed to the strong performance of the Canada Winter Games (CWG) boys hockey team at the Richmond International Midget Hockey Tournament in Richmond B.C. last week.

Team Yukon edged the Vancouver Spirit 3-2 in the semi-finals, narrowly avoiding overtime.

The Yukon went up 2-1 with 13 minutes left in the third period, and held that score until the Spirit pulled their goalie, forcing the CWG club to call a time out.

Coach Jay Glass put his top five guys on the ice to prevent a tying goal.

No luck there.

"They scored with 52 seconds left," Glass said. "I was pretty happy about going to overtime because I thought we had a little more talent 4-on-4 and a better goaltender, so I wasn't worried at all, and I felt like we were the team who was in better shape, I felt like they were tired. So I was quite optimistic about going into overtime. But we didn't have to – because the next face off we took it down and scored with 18 seconds left."

Some luck there.

"It was crazy, really," Glass added. "That was a tight game."

The goal put the Yukon into the finals against the Kelowna Rockets, a big, strong team which consisted of seven 17 year olds, seven 16 year olds and six 15 year olds, Glass pointed out.

The age for the CWG is made up of 14- and 15-year-olds: the new age limit for the 2011 Halifax Winter Games is 15, down from 16 when Whitehorse hosted four years ago.

Considering, the boys were proud to end the tournament with a silver medal, Glass said.

The Yukon lost to Kelowna 5-2 in the finals after leading 2-1 with 13 minutes left in the third, when the B.C. club netted a power play goal.

From there, the Yukon took a string of untimely penalties, Glass said.

"It was one of those games where I could tell we were running out of gas," he said.

"That was a good team that we really had no business competing with and we took it to them. We were just tired. Our guys gave it everything they had that day, but against that team it just wasn't enough."

The finals marked the Yukon's seventh game in five days – at top speed against older, bigger players.

The Yukon played in the midget AA division in the tournament, while Team B.C. and Team Alberta players that will compete at the Winter Games played in midget AAA/major midget.

Team Yukon will play Newfoundland and Labrador, the Northwest Territories and Prince Edward Island in the round robin in Halifax, where the top two teams will advance.

As with the age change, the format has changed for this year's Games, with the opening groups made up from results at the last Games.

Glass said that some of the teams his club faced in Richmond may be similar to the lower-end provinces at the Games.

"It really wouldn't surprise me if the Kelowna Rockets weren't in the same level as the teams that we're going to play," he said.

"The Kelowna Rockets might be at the same level, or maybe even a little bit stronger, just because of their age, as the teams that we play in our opening round."

Glass also placed Nova Scotia and New Brunswick into the category in which the Yukon can be highly competitive, based on his side's results in Richmond.

"If we can handle these older teams, I think we'll be right in the ballpark with those teams," he said. "That's my assumption. Once you start getting into Ontario, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Alberta, they're going to be a level up – just how far up I don't know."

In Richmond, the Yukon won one, lost two and tied one in the opening round, winning their final game 6-1 against the Alaska U16 AA All Stars to squeak into the quarterfinals.

"It was a little bit more of an even playing field for us, but we still played a pretty good game," Glass said. "The 6-1 score was, again, not really indicative of the play, because it was 2-1 after the second period. It was tight until around the 10 minute mark of the third."

That's when the Yukon blew the score wide open.

"That was a good skating team," Glass added. "I think we remained patient; I think we frustrated them."

Which is what the Yukon had wanted to do throughout the tourney.

Glass recalls his club giving up few odd-man rushes while in Richmond.

The Yukon achieved tight defensive-zone coverage by having the high man back-check.

"We were playing a bit of a trap, so I think teams got frustrated," Glass said.

The Yukon collapsed all five skaters close to their net, with the wingers dropping to the high slot rather than force the point men.

"We're giving away shots from the outside," Glass said.

"We're trying to pressure them, but we don't want any loose pucks in front of the net, we're really trying to be stingy and gritty in front of our net, and so far it's paid off.

"It's probably the only way we're going to see any success at all in Halifax. It's probably hard for the guys to play, maybe a little boring to watch at times, but that's what we have to do."

Between now and February, the CWG boys will continue to work on conditioning, defensive-zone coverage and the power play.

"I thought that even in the Kelowna Rockets game in the finals, if we could have capitalized on our power play late in the second and early in the third ... it might have been a different result in the end," Glass said.

The Kelowna-based Pursuit of Excellence Hockey Academy will come up to Whitehorse to play the Midget Mustangs on Jan. 28 and Jan. 29 at Takhini Arena.

The Midget Mustangs, which has seven CWG players on their roster, will follow up that stint with a trip south to play in Lethbridge, Alta., where the Bantam Mustangs will also get in a couple games.