

SPORTS

Yukon will rely on sound defensive system

By ECHO ROSS
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Editor's note: this is part of a series of features being published on the various sports which make up the 2007 Canada Winter Games, and the athletes who will be representing the Yukon in them.

The Yukon men's Canada Winter Games hockey team is well aware of what they're up against.

They've heard the stories.

Players who have represented the Yukon in the past, such as Jarrett Deuling, Bill McKay, Brian Power and Dan Johnson, recall taking on teams like Ontario or defending-champion Alberta, with final scores such as 22-3 – in favour of the other team.

They talk about facing future NHLers like Chris Pronger and Paul Kariya back in 1991, or future superstars like Cam Barker and Devan Dubnyk in 2003.

With this year's Canada Games rosters set for the 12 provinces and territories (Nunavut is not sending a team), the Yukoners know they'll be up against dozens of major junior players, as well as junior A and AAA midget.

But the local squad refuses to be intimidated. They know how big of a deal the Canada Games are. They can feel the buzz around town. And they're determined not to cave at all under the pressure.

"I realize, playing against these teams, a lot of the guys are in major junior," said goaltender Ian Perrier, who's heard from past Yukon goalies he could be facing up to 70 shots a game.

"They're going to have pretty hefty shots. But at the same time, I've played against some pretty good players this season already, so I think I'm ready to go.

"I love getting peppered. My personal goal is to pretty much stand on my head."

Perrier recently joined the rest of the territory's team back home in Whitehorse, after spending the majority of the hockey season playing AAA with the Fort St. John Tracker Flyers. He also played exhibition games for the Williams Lake junior A hockey club.

"I've had this kind of pressure before," he said. "In Fort St. John, we would go to tournaments and I would get about 70 shots. So it's not really weighing on my mind too much."

Still, it's been somewhat of an adjustment so far for Perrier, who travelled with the team – under the Whitehorse Northern Cross Mustangs midget rep banner – to Calgary last weekend for a three-game series against the Edge, a highly-ranked midget team from a private sports school in the Alberta city.

Perrier admits it took him a game or two to adjust, before he was able to help the local team pull out a win in the final contest.

"In Fort St. John, it's not as defensive as here, so the opposing teams would get situations that were just impossible to stop. Here, I'm getting less shots and they're more visible."

The Mustangs, most of which will



Star photo by ECHO ROSS

STICK HANDLING – Team Yukon forward Joe Densmore carries the puck down the ice during a practice drill Thursday evening at Takhini Arena.

represent the territory next week at the Games, flew down to Calgary last Friday and drove to Banff for a game on Saturday. Coach Mike Young said they had a "sketchy" start.

"It was almost like the kids thought they were leagues below the Edge team, so they had a bad attitude going in," he said. "They really panicked with the puck, weren't making good passes."

The Mustangs were down 3-0 early, then fought back to make it 4-3 for the Edge.

"We were getting chances, we had the momentum," said Jim Stephens, manager of the Mustangs and an assistant coach with the Canada Games team. "But we just couldn't put it in."

Whitehorse pulled its goalie and the Edge scored a couple of empty-netters to make the final score 7-3.

Despite the loss, Young said the team realized at the end of the game they could compete with their Calgary counterparts.

Prior to the next game Sunday, the Mustangs were taken out for dinner by their sponsor, Northern Cross, then packed into a limousine and shuttled to the Saddledome, home of the NHL's Calgary Flames, to test out the ice there for a game.

"They felt like they were rock stars," Young laughed.

The Mustangs ended up losing the second game 3-0, but the coaching staff felt like the effort was much better, particularly on the defensive side.

All of the students from the Edge athletic school, about 250 of them, sat in the stands to take in the final matchup, which proved to be the most successful for the Mustangs, as they ended up winning 6-3.

Whitehorse was ahead 2-0, then fell behind 3-2 before tying it up in the third and taking control from there.

Young said the entire trip gave the team a much-needed confidence boost and had them really buying into the systems.

"I think the Edge were really surprised," said Stephens. "It was a great win for us."

"They were really good hosts, a class organization. The kids played good, fast, tough hockey. No cheap shots."

One of the major reasons for the Calgary trip, was so the Canada Games players could work on solidifying their defence.

Defenceman Kaleb Dawe, who is instrumental on the Mustangs' power play, and defenceman Nick Mauro,

also the team's captain, are too old for the Canada Games. That means Team Yukon will have two big holes on defence.

They hope one of those holes can be filled by Lawrence Brennan, who is currently attending school and playing hockey in Ontario, but will fly home next week.

"Lawrence showed us some good stuff (when he joined the team for a tournament at Christmas)," said Young. "Obviously, we're going to need the forwards to help out as well."

One of the forwards who will be counted on defensively, as well as offensively, is Robbie Stuckey. Stuckey has been a key member of the Mustangs' penalty-killing unit all season and is ready for the role at the Canada Games.

"Every time we get a penalty, all year, it's almost always, 'Stuckey, (Colin) Dendys get out there,'" he smiled. "We've been doing pretty good, getting better every game. "We just have to be really mentally prepared, start thinking early about what we have to do."

Nobody knows more about the importance of the mental aspect than goaltenders, and Perrier will be getting some assistance in that regard during

the Games from goalie coach Eli Wilson of the Medicine Hat Tigers.

"He'll be around for support and he's got a lot of experience," said Perrier, who will be joined by Mitch Heynen, one of the Mustangs' starting goaltenders this season, during the Games.

"For only playing two years (of rep hockey), I think Mitch is unbelievable," said Perrier about his comrade. "He'd had really good training and seems to put it to good use. I think he'll do better than fine."

Stuckey admitted the other teams' rosters look intimidating, but said they just have to go out there and play the game the way they have been.

"I just think it's like any other team," he stated. "We have to consistently go hard every shift, keep our work ethic up and stay out of the box."

The top line of Ted Stephens, Lowell Johnston and Kane Dawe are expected to provide most of the offence.

Team Yukon will also be getting offensive help from Evan Campbell, who played alongside Perrier in Fort St. John this season, and Drew Pettitt, who is currently playing major midget hockey with the Caribou Cougars in Prince George.

"Evan has been playing a really good power forward position, even though he's a little guy," said Perrier. "I think when (Campbell and Pettitt) get here, it will be a really pleasant surprise for everyone."

"They're certainly excited enough. When I showed Evan his gloves, he was giddy with excitement."

Next Thursday will mark the first time this season that the entire team will practice together, just two days before they open the Canada Games against Quebec.

"There's not too much you can work on," said Young. "Obviously, we'll do some breakouts and stuff, get a bit of chemistry going. But basically, we'll just try to have fun, nothing too serious."

Asked about how to prepare the team for the possibility of a lopsided loss against Quebec or even Nova Scotia in the preliminary round, coach Joe Martin said they'll treat it just like any other game.

"I don't think you even touch on it," said Martin, who originally hails from Ontario and used to play junior hockey himself. "You just try to win the small, individual battles. If we just continue the way we approach every game, we'll be fine."

Young agreed it's important to take pride in the little things and never stop competing.

"It's about finding achievements in other areas, but at the same time, keeping them off the board as much as possible."

Both coaches are aiming to finish in ninth position, hoping to pull out a couple of wins against teams like the N.W.T., Newfoundland or New Brunswick.

"I think on any given day, they can be beaten," stated Martin.

Young said the key will be everyone coming together at the same time.

"We'll need all 20 guys playing their best hockey ever."