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Penalties cripple Mustangs in provincial final

By ECHO ROSS

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For Mitch Heynen, it was all a little too familiar. Two years ago, Heynen was the backup goaltender for the Whitehorse Mustang AA hockey team at the 2005 B.C. provincial championship in Terrace. After an impressive run through the round-robin portion of that event, the Mustangs came short in the final.

While they won just the second provincial championship medal in the territory – a silver – the players returned home with mixed emotions, as well as a new determination to stand on top the next time.

Unfortunately, the pressure of competing at home last year seemed to overwhelm as the Mustangs finished the tournament without a win, but faced with another this year’s championship in Enderby, everything seemed to be in their favour.

The majority of the players had recently skated at the Canada Winter Games, a much higher than AA, and the coaching staff had been taking the team to AAA tournaments all year in hopes they would be better prepared.

Buoyed by strong goaltending from Heynen and Scott Smeeton, the Mustangs moved through the round-robin competition in Enderby, giving up just six goals in five games with a 5-0 record.

They dominated Dawson Creek 7-2 in their semifinal and their confidence soared at an all-time high heading into the gold medal final against Aldergrove – the undefeated team in the tournament – on Friday afternoon.

After taking an early 1-0 lead against Aldergrove, the Mustangs started getting penalty trouble and found themselves down 3-2 after the first period. It was 5-2 second, and penalties continued to haunt Whitehorse in the third, as they found themselves on the wrong end of a final 8-4 score.

Six of the eight goals allowed by the Mustangs were on the power play while on during four-on-four action. In contrast, Whitehorse potted just two goals on the play, despite firing a game total of more than 40 shots at the Aldergrove goal. “They had a really good power play,” stated Heynen, who was in net for five of the goals before making way for Smeeton. “I couldn’t see through, there were so many screens. We couldn’t screen their goalie well enough, he could see everything.

“We had lots of chances, we just weren’t in the right place. We hit quite a few.” Forward Fraser Love, who had a strong tournament for Whitehorse, said he thought the special teams played fairly well, but there were just so many penalties that “even



they're going to put it in the net."

Coach Mike Young said while it may look on paper like his team was undisciplined there wasn't a lot of rough stuff. He said it was a fairly clean game, but the officials calling it very tight, with every little hook or hold resulting in a trip to the penalty box. Still, he acknowledged with the new rules at all levels of hockey, teams have to be able to kill penalties to win games, and the Mustangs just weren't able to do that on Friday.

They were also up against a tough goaltender, said Young.

"Their goalie played unreal. We out-shot them something like 44-30, so we did have more energy at times. Despite it being an 8-4 final, it was actually a close battle. Heynen said it was tough for him to adjust to the increase in number of shots on goal during the final, after his defence was allowing barely anything through the first two games. Before, agreed Young, the team managed to keep all of the shots to the outside. "It was harder for me personally, because I was used to less shots," said Heynen. "It was harder to focus."

Another factor for the Mustangs in the final could have been fatigue, although Young said he doesn't like to make excuses.

Whitehorse had to play two games in one day twice during the tournament while Aldergrove, placed in a smaller pool, never had to play more than once a day.

"The scheduling wasn't consistent for sure," said Young. "Even the other coaches mentioned it to us, how we had a much tougher road to get there."

Heynen said he didn't think fatigue hurt the team too much, pointing out they had been working on their fitness especially hard this year because of Canada Games. It was the Canada Games that both Young and Fraser felt played a big role in the team's provincial success. "I think it really helped," said Young. "Our intensity was quite high. We were a little out of sync there. In the first few games, we came out flying and took some teams by surprise."

"The main thing Canada Games did for us, was we learned we could play with amazing teams like Quebec," added Love. "We looked at our competition at first as just another team. We weren't intimidated."

Two of the players who weren't at Canada Games, defenceman Kaleb Dawe and Taylor Pasloski, were still two of the most impressive, said Young. He said Dawe controlled the play and made great passes throughout the tournament.

"Pasloski played the best hockey by far I've ever seen him play. At one point, I (Johnston) was injured so he was up with the first line. He got two goals that got him back on the third line playing a shutdown role.

"He was buying into every role we asked him to do and he did it with perfection. Offensively, it was Kane Dawe who led the way, collecting 15 goals and six assists. Linemate Ted Stephens was also a force to be reckoned with, notching five goals and adding 17 assists.

"Kane was just getting in the holes and really taking advantage of his offensive opportunities," said Young. "Of course it helped him working with Ted, who really creates space and makes great passes. And Lowell was strong too when he played. "The three of them were just unstoppable really."

The entire team has worked really hard all year, Young added. Even though they were short of the ultimate prize in midget AA hockey, he said everyone is pretty proud of themselves right now.

"There's mixed emotions. We're very happy that we made it to the final. Our goal was to make it into the top four, so we exceeded that. But at the same time, it would have been really nice to win."

As the team filed off the plane Saturday, their silver medals tucked away safely in bags, Heynen reflected on his second chance at provincial gold in three years. “It’s good to be in the finals two years, but knowing we could have won, it kind of stings. We had the opportunity twice.”

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