

SPORTS

Mustangs on a high as they await Richmond

By ECHO ROSS
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It took three months and three major tournaments, but the Whitehorse midget Mustangs finally seem to have adjusted to the jump from AA to AAA competition.

After stops in Kamloops and Abbotsford earlier this season, where the Mustangs managed just one win out of the two combined, Whitehorse headed to Richmond on Boxing Day for their annual international holiday hockey tournament.

They returned home this week with gold medals around their necks and a huge confidence boost heading into next weekend's series with Richmond, as well as the 2007 Canada Winter Games. It's all thanks to a number-one power play unit which is on a roll, great goaltending and a better defensive effort overall.

"It's wicked, because the first tournament we didn't do so well and then the second, we had just one game where we played unbelievable. This tournament, we stepped it up a whole lot," said a still grinning Nick Mauro, defenceman and captain of the Mustangs.

"I think it's just getting used to the AAA level. The first tournament, it was a bit of a shock for us. Now, we've been in it for a while, we've worked ourselves up to that level now. We're on par with most AAA teams."

The Mustangs finished with an overall record of four wins, two ties and one loss. Coaches Joe Martin and Mike Young said this time around, the Mustangs really focused on getting a strong start.

"We didn't have to battle back too often," stated Martin. "Generally, we were getting the first goal, or the first couple of chances. That's a big improvement."

"Our defensive hockey ... we're making a lot less mistakes," added Young.

The first game for Whitehorse was Dec. 27 against Ridge Meadows, a team ranked number-two on the Pacific Coast in AAA action.

"That speaks volumes about their team," said Martin. "We knew going in they don't make many mistakes. It was going to be a tough game. And we did play pretty good."

"We went toe-to-toe with them," agreed Young. "It was 1-1, then 2-2, then 3-3 ... all the way up to 4-4 before they went ahead."

The Mustangs had a lot more chances, said Martin, but couldn't capitalize, and ended up falling to Ridge Meadows 6-4.

Later that same day, Whitehorse took on South Delta, a game which Young said ended up being "the killer" in terms of final round-robin standings. In the end it came down to goals for and against, and the two teams tied 2-2.

Determined to finish their final two games of the round-robin on a high note, and possibly clinch second place in their pool, the Mustangs came out flying against Kamloops. Martin said Kamloops was a good team, but just couldn't keep up. After scoring both short-handed and on the power play, Whitehorse blanked the Okanagan crew 2-0.

"It was a must-win, so we went in quite focused," said Young. "Scott (Smeeton, the Mustangs goaltender) had to make some good saves, but for the



Photo by VICKI DAWE

BACK ON TOP – The Whitehorse Mustangs rep hockey team claimed Tier II gold in AAA action at the Richmond International Midget Tournament in B.C. last week.



Photo by VICKI DAWE

DENIED – Whitehorse Mustangs forward Kane Dawe is stopped on a scoring opportunity by the opposing goaltender.

most part, the guys played for him."

The Mustangs' final game of the round-robin was against Littleton, Colorado. It turned out to be one of the wildest games Young can remember in minor hockey.

Heading into the game, Whitehorse was tied with South Delta for second place in the pool standings and only the top two teams from each of the three pools advanced to the Tier I finals. South Delta was playing at another rink in a game that started about 15 minutes before the Mustangs took the ice.

With about 10 minutes remaining in the game, the Mustangs were up 5-2 against Littleton when they found out they needed to score two more goals in order to beat South Delta in the tiebreaker, since South Delta had just won their contest.

"So we pulled the goalie and tried to get the extra goals," explained Young, who admitted people in the stands and even the opposing coaches were looking at him like he was nuts for doing it. "But unfortunately, they scored on the empty net and then they pulled their goalie and tied it up."

The final score was 5-5, which meant the Mustangs finished the round-robin in third place in their pool, which meant they were in the Tier II playoffs.

"The guys were a little disappointed, because they wanted to be in the top flight," said Young. "But we talked about how we only had one loss at the tournament and our main goal, was we didn't want to lose another."

In their first playoff game, Whitehorse faced off against Nanaimo, a team that Martin said was undisciplined and didn't have any systems. They were by far the weakest team the Mustangs faced at the tournament, both coaches agreed.

Whitehorse ended up winning that contest 6-3 and advanced to the semifinals, where they would take on Surrey.

"That was maybe the toughest game of the tournament," said Martin. "They don't give you an inch, they battle for every puck, don't ever take a shift off."

The game was tied 2-2 when Surrey was awarded a penalty shot with about five minutes remaining. Goaltender Mitch Heynen was able to rise to the occasion and made a fine stop on the Surrey forward, preserving the tie.

"It was a questionable call, really, and Mitch made probably the biggest save of the tournament," said Young.

"In the semifinal, Mitch was unreal," added forward Kane Dawe. "He was saving pretty much everything, even the penalty shot."

The score remained knotted at two

until forward Robbie Stuckey received a pass at the blue line with just seconds remaining in regulation.

"Everyone yelled 'Shoot!' to Rob," smiled fellow Mustangs forward Ted Stephens. "He shot it from the point and Lowell (Johnston) put it in."

Johnston said he just tried to get his stick up for the tip and fortunately, it went in – with 3.5 seconds left on the clock.

"It was like, three inches away from being high sticking, but it wasn't," he explained. "I just didn't want to go to a shootout. I wanted it over as soon as possible."

Thanks to Johnston and Stuckey's heroics, Whitehorse was off to the gold medal final, where they were up against the Anchorage Junior Aces.

"Scott had a shaky start," said Martin. "He was stellar all tournament, but just had a couple of long shots elude him. So we were down 2-0 halfway through the second when we pulled him and put Mitch in."

The Mustangs headed into the third period still down by two goals, but Martin said the players rallied around goaltender Heynen and scored a quick goal in the first few minutes of the final period.

"Then they knew they were within striking distance," said Martin. "We tied it up and from then on in, it was a very tight game."

The two teams went to overtime, where captain Mauro would score the game-winner and help Whitehorse claim the gold. Mauro took a shot from the blueline and with the opposing goaltender screened in front, the puck found its way into the back of the net.

Young said it was like a scene from a movie, as the captain led his team to gold. Mauro, meanwhile, was still somewhat in shock at practice Thursday.

"I just couldn't believe it went in," he grinned. "Everyone just kind of froze. Then the hands went up and I went over and picked up Kane."

"Kane was the reason that goal went in. He was really battling down low. It should have been Kane's goal."

Mauro pointed out Dawe was a force all tournament, along with fellow first-liners Stephens and Johnston. That line

formed the number-one power play unit along with defencemen Kaleb Dawe and Alex McDougall.

"That first power play line scored probably 60 per cent of our goals," said Mauro.

Johnston was the top scorer for the team, finishing with seven goals and six assists, while Stephens collected three goals and seven assists and Kane picked up four goals and five assists. Kaleb recorded three goals and two assists.

Stephens felt the top trio could have had even more success offensively, considering the number of chances they were given throughout the seven games.

"We hit a lot of posts," stated Johnston, as all three forwards agreed shooting was definitely something they would be working on in practice.

Still, Stephens felt it was their best tournament by far, pointing out the reason they work so well together is they're all great skaters with tons of speed.

"The other lines played well too," he stated. "Especially the first years. That's why we did so well."

"If they weren't scoring, they weren't letting other people score on them," agreed Johnston.

The Mustangs will now prepare for a three-game series against Richmond's AAA team in Whitehorse Jan. 12-14. The two teams played each other at the tournament in Kamloops in October, where Richmond pulled out the victory.

"They moved onto the (Tier I playoffs) at their tournament, so they must be a pretty decent team," said Martin.

Mauro said he's looking forward to the series, since it's always fun to play in front of your home town crowd.

"We just have to focus on what we've learned over the past couple of months," he said.

"If we play like we did (in Richmond), we should have no problem," added Stephens.

The Mustangs will have to play their next series without forwards Daniel Clethroe and Owen MacKinnon, as both are nursing injuries. Clethroe sprained his ankle while in Richmond while MacKinnon separated his shoulder and is out two to four weeks.