

SPORTS

California sun has nothing on Yukon scenery

By ECHO ROSS
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The Whitehorse Mustangs can thank the Richmond Blues if attendance at their next tournament on home ice skyrockets.

After a thrilling three-game series this past weekend, many fans in the territory left the Canada Games Centre Sunday with smiles on their faces, especially after the hometown midget rep hockey team took two of three and lost the other in a shootout.

On Friday, the Mustangs fell behind to Richmond 6-3 before staging a comeback and squeaking out an 8-7 victory.

Saturday, the Games centre was packed as CBC television descended on the site for part of its *Hockey Day in Canada* coverage. With tons of enthusiasm and full stomachs, thanks to free donuts from Tim Hortons, Whitehorse residents of all ages enjoyed a see-saw battle which saw the two teams tied 4-4 after regulation.

Most of the fans stuck around for the entire shootout which followed, despite the fact it ran an incredible 18 players before Richmond finally pulled out the win. The Blues were on their way back through the lineup when one of their forwards found the back of the net for his second time.

Mustangs goalie Scott Smeeton admitted he was nervous, "just waiting for our team to score."

Coach Mike Young said when it gets to the point where you've faced 18 shooters, and stopped the majority of them, Smeeton probably wasn't as concerned about getting the win anymore.

"The thought of losing the shootout is not as important, knowing you've already made so many saves."

The shootout wasn't the only area where Smeeton, who also played half of Friday's game in relief of Mitch Heynen, impressed the coaches, players and fans. The young goaltender received a standing ovation for a save he made in the third period.

"I was just about to mark the whole line down for a minus," smiled Young. "Then out of nowhere, he flashes the leather. Just an amazing save."

"He's come a long way this year. He just keeps getting better every game."

Asked about his performance over the weekend, a modest Smeeton said he was "pretty good", but gave credit to his teammates for helping him.

"The defensive coverage in our zone was great," he said. "They got it out pretty quick most of the time."

Smeeton took in the final game Sunday from the bench, as the coaching staff elected to start Heynen. Young said although Heynen struggled in Friday's contest, they wanted to see how he would rebound, and in the end, they were pleased as Whitehorse came out on top 7-4.

The Blues had a rough first period, as the Mustangs jumped out to a 4-1 lead, much to the delight of yet another large crowd at the Games centre. But Richmond made a goaltending change in the first intermission, electing to go with Aaron Chin over Paven Sangara, and after that, the chances were fairly even as both teams were handed several power play opportunities.

Chin, who played the first part of Saturday's match and held the Mustangs scoreless before he left the game, said



Star photo by ECHO ROSS

SLICK - Whitehorse Mustangs defenceman Kaleb Dawe (front left) tries to elude a member of the Richmond Blues (far right) during their matchup Sunday evening.



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BATTLE WON - Mustangs Joe Densmore (right) and Fraser Love (front left) celebrate after Whitehorse scored during the second period of Sunday's battle against Richmond.

he felt a lot better about his final two performances than his first one Friday.

"I played like crap in the first game," stated the quiet athlete. "But after that, it was not bad. I think the whole team could have done better. We sort of let our emotions get out of control at the end."

Coaches on both sides were wondering how they could top the excitement of Saturday's contest and at the end of regulation Sunday, they got their answer.

As one would probably expect when a team plays each other three times in three days, emotions were high and tempers flared on both sides, culminating in

a team-on-team clash with some pushing and shoving - although some players refrained from entering the melee.

While no one condoned fighting at the minor hockey level, it certainly seemed to get those in the crowd pumped up.

"There were lots of words being exchanged during the game and it boiled over," said Richmond head coach AJ Sander.

"It's been an exciting three games, I wasn't sure what was going to happen," added Smeeton. "But thankfully, it didn't get out of hand."

Young said it could have been a lot worse and pointed out the Mustangs

have had a good image so far this season and he hoped the incident Sunday wouldn't ruin that.

"I'm not a fan of that stuff," he stated. "It's too bad, because we had such a good game yesterday. It would have been great if we had lined up and shook hands."

"But they're all friends off the ice."

Overall, Sander said the trip North was a great experience for his players, none of which had ever been to the Yukon. The coaches have taken previous teams to Alaska for tournaments, he said, but they had never been to the territory either.

"We play a lot of local teams in Rich-

mond, so we don't do much travelling," he explained. "The kids had a choice of here or San Diego. They chose here."

"They actually said, 'We can go to California anytime.'"

Sander and the rest of the Blues made the most of their time in the Yukon, hitting the trails at Meadow Lakes on dog sleds and also heading down hill on toboggans. In fact, the coach felt all of the fun on snow Sunday may have led to their demise on ice.

"I think they may have been a little tired (Sunday night)," he said. "I think we just ran out of gas at the end."

Despite the losses, Sander thought his team played extremely well all weekend and said both teams were very evenly matched. The teams had met once previously, at a tournament in Kamloops earlier in the season, where they played to a tie.

"I personally have a lot of respect for that team," said Young. "If you take a shift off, they're going to capitalize. I thought overall, the balance between the teams was great."

Young said the Mustangs' conditioning may have given them the edge in the end. One of the players he was most impressed with was first-year forward Joe Densmore.

"Densmore is looking the strongest I think I've ever seen him," he stated, adding he was pleased with captain Nick Mauro's patience on defence.

"The experience is really kicking in for him this year. You can tell he's a lot more in control out there."

The top offensive line of Ted Stephens, Lowell Johnston and Kane Dawe was once again a force for the Mustangs, providing five of the seven goals in Sunday's contest. The defensive pairing of Kaleb Dawe and Alex McDougall was also strong.

Densmore's linemate Drew O'Connor was throwing body checks all weekend, which Young said was great considering he hasn't played as much as the other players on the team this year.

"Drew went in there and didn't mess around."

Forwards Robbie Stuckey and Colin Dendys were relied upon as key members of the Mustangs' penalty kill, a role which Young said the two fell into after the Kamloops tournament in October.

"They've been great at killing penalties together ever since Kamloops. They've really picked their game up and are getting points when they have to as well, taking a lot of pressure off the top line."

Forward Densmore agreed the whole team played really well during the series, pointing to Johnston and Smeeton as those he was most impressed with. While the Mustangs had moments where they broke down in their own end, he said, they won most of the battles along the boards.

"I thought we worked really good down low and we had a good power play, good special teams. I was really impressed with the goalies. Both of them played really well."

Next up for the Mustangs is a trip to Alberta and B.C. in early February, a final tune-up before the majority of the team gets set for the 2007 Canada Winter Games.

The Richmond Blues flew home this morning and will get right back into league play, with a game scheduled for Tuesday.