

SPORTS

Series provide unique opportunities for Outside opponents

By ECHO ROSS
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It was a good, old-fashioned hockey weekend in Whitehorse, as hundreds of Yukoners braved the frigid temperatures to try their luck at pond hockey while dozens of others took on opponents from outside the territory in a much warmer environment.

Grateful that their weekend series were held indoors, the bantam and midget Mustangs rep hockey teams, as well as the midget Selects, faced off against Fairbanks, the Northwest Territories and Tok, Alaska, respectively.

The bantam Mustangs and midget Selects played five games – switching their opponents for one of them – while the midget Mustangs engaged in a four-game series with the rival N.W.T.

After opening the weekend with a 10-1 victory over Tok – a team which almost couldn't make the trip due to extreme temperatures back home – the Selects continued to roll through their Alaskan counterparts, posting wins on Friday evening and Saturday morning as well.

On Saturday afternoon, they decided to try their luck against the bantam team from Fairbanks, which had been handily beating the bantam Mustangs in their first three contests.

Fairbanks, considered a wild card coming into the tournament because not much was known about them, continued to impress spectators, skating away with a 14-4 victory.

The bantam Mustangs, meanwhile, picked up their first victory of the weekend against Tok.

On Sunday, Fairbanks once again defeated the bantam Mustangs while the Selects closed out their weekend with another victory over Tok.

Two players from the Selects – Coty Fraser and Burt Stephens – switched sides in the final game, helping Tok create a longer bench. Three Dawson residents also suited up for Tok during the series.

The series between the midget Mustangs and the N.W.T. was somewhat closer, although it became clear early on who the stronger team was.

"I think we played good," said Mustangs defenceman Alex McDougall, who donned the "C" in the final game, since captain Nick Mauro had the night off. "We had lots of shots, came out flying. We got the puck in and cycled really well."

After a 5-1 win on Friday night, Whitehorse fired 70 shots on goal in the second game Saturday morning, walking away with a 3-2 win. They managed to cash in on a lot more chances Saturday night, blanking the N.W.T. 10-0.

Things got a little rough in the fourth and final game Sunday, as frustrations boiled over. Two Mustangs were ejected for hitting from behind while numerous players on both sides took a seat in the penalty box.

By the time the third period rolled around, cooler heads prevailed, and Whitehorse goaltender Scott Smeeton recorded his first shutout of the weekend, 4-0.

Mitch Heynen picked up the other shutout for the Mustangs while four different players recorded hat tricks – Owen MacKinnon, Ted Stephens, Robbie Stuckey and Lowell Johnston.

McDougall said playing in AAA tournaments Outside this season, rather



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WHATEVER IT TAKES – Whitehorse Mustangs defenceman Jeff Gartshore (second from left) prepares to block a shot as goaltender Scott Smeeton and two forwards from the N.W.T. await its arrival during Sunday's matchup.



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FROM THEIR PERSPECTIVE – Sunday's contest between the Whitehorse midget Mustangs and the N.W.T. is seen from the player's bench.

than the usual AA, has really helped the team come together. While the N.W.T. squad had speed, he said, it just wasn't up to par with the competition the Mustangs have been experiencing elsewhere.

"We've been having trouble putting the puck in the net at AAA tournaments, so hopefully, now that we showed we can do it here, we can score more at other tournaments too," he said.

Coaches Mike Young and Joe Martin agreed that the AAA hockey has been paying off, adding the geography of the local team is a benefit.

For the N.W.T., the series provided an opportunity they hadn't had yet this season. With players hailing from Yellowknife, Hay River, Inuvik and Fort Hope, this was the first trip they were all able to take together.

They've had to do a lot of fundraising in order to make it to Whitehorse, as well as get corporate sponsors on board, such as First Air. Despite being on the

losing end in all four games, head coach Tom Williams said the trip was worth all of the expenses.

"This was an excellent opportunity to bring our team together," he stated, as his team packed up their gear and prepared to head home following Sunday afternoon's final game.

"It's a challenge to get them all together because of the geography and the cost of travel.

"We were still looking at making some decisions on the final selection of our team. This provided some good competition and we identified some of the areas we need to work on."

One look at the final scores and it's easy to see the N.W.T. is in need of some more offence, however, the coach feels the scores are also deceiving when it comes to goaltending and defence.

The team is currently carrying three goaltenders, all of which played during the weekend and all of which made some

impressive saves to keep the games as close as they were.

Whitehorse fired 70 shots at the net in the second game, but only came away with three goals.

"Our goaltenders and defence played well, all of them," stated Williams.

One of those goalies was second-year midget Michael Taylor, who saw action in the first and second games, as well as the second period of the final game Sunday.

"I thought the competition was great," said Taylor. "Our defence was a little rough in the beginning, but we pulled it together."

"It was our first time playing together. I haven't even seen some of these guys before, so it's definitely an adjustment. But I think we did well. We just need to get used to working as a team."

The Mustangs already have chemistry, thanks to years of playing minor

hockey together and the fact most of them hail from Whitehorse. Still, Martin admitted the coaching staff was a little worried after the first two tournaments of the season when they weren't getting scoring from anywhere other than the first line.

"After Abbotsford, we were wondering, 'Where is our offence going to come from?'. But we changed the lines around a little bit. Now Glen Skookum is playing with Colin Dendys and Robbie Stuckey and they're starting to contribute. That takes a bit of pressure off the first line."

The coaches were also pleased to see production from MacKinnon, who chalked his hat trick on Sunday up to hard work. MacKinnon said the whole team played hard, adding they had great positioning and did what the coaches told them to do.

"Everything worked out well."

MacKinnon and McDougall pointed to several teammates who impressed them, including Taylor Pasloski, Fraser Love, Drew O'Connor and Tanner Kulych, as well as first-year defenceman Alex Johnston.

While Young believes the team's conditioning is up to par – they played four games in three days and still seemed to have quite a bit of energy – he cautioned there is a lot more to be done before the Canada Games.

"Our power play is really good, but there were a few times when we were five-on-three that I think we could have done better," Martin pointed out. "Everything might be working OK, but we want to try some different things, make some minor changes here and there."

The next tournament for the midget Mustangs will be Dec. 27 in Richmond, and once again they will play AAA.

"We haven't been finding ways to win in those AAA tournaments," summed up Young. "In the next couple of months, we really need them to focus."

"We've been underachieving a bit so far this year."