

KELOWNA PACKERS IN TOWN

Saunders on sidelines for team home opener

Chris Saunders' career in junior hockey has mainly consisted of watching from the sidelines and waiting patiently for injuries to heal over during the past two seasons.

The talented defenceman will have to wait one more game at least before he gets his first opportunity to play in more than a year. Head Coach Don Moores has decided not to inject Saunders into his lineup tonight when the local club hosts Kelowna Packers in their first home game of the season.

"Chris (Saunders) is ready to play but we felt it was just too tough a game to put him in," explained Moores of his decision to leave the blueliner in the stands for another night. "He hasn't played in quite a while."

It's been almost a year to the day, in fact, since Saunders saw action with the local club and that was during the team's swing through the Coastal Division last October. Saunders scored the winning goal in a 5-4 victory over Burnaby Bluehawks and was instrumental in helping Lakers to a 2-2 record during that jaunt.

Saunders, meanwhile, though impatient to get back into the game, admits the lengthy absence has dulled his keen sense of the game somewhat.

"I'm anxious to play and a bit apprehensive," he suggested. "It's been a while since I played a game so I'll be a bit rusty for a while."

Moores has seven other defencemen to pick and choose from in the meantime including a couple of sizeable ones in Darryle Wienberger and Murray Baron. Locally-grown Tony Toth is no slouch on size while newcomer Kevin Horn and sophomore Shawn Hartnell are solid performers on the blueline as well. Rounding out the defensive corps are Rick Rozecki and Jim Scott.

Moores expects a hard-hitting, exciting contest with

Packers who are currently holding down second place in the Interior Division of the B.C. Junior Hockey League with a record of 4-1, the only loss being a home-ice defeat at the hands of Lakers.

"It (game) will be a fast, hard-hitting game," said Moores. "Wayne (Head Coach Wayne Naka) is an honest coach and always has good clubs under him."

"Our guys are pumped and it's going to be an excellent opportunity to see what kind of club we have this year," he added.

Moores recently acquired goaltender Darrel Dickens from Abbotsford, formerly Revelstoke Rangers. Dickens had a proven record with Rangers last season and Moores feels he will be the stable performer in the net that he has been looking for.

"He (Dickens) is a very consistent goaltender," he said. "He had a good season in Revelstoke last year."

Packers, meanwhile, have 16-year old rookie goaltender Ryan Dennis answering the call between the pipes these days. Despite his youth and inexperience at the junior level, Dennis has been an integral part of a solid defensive corps for Kelowna who have allowed just 18 goals against themselves in their first five games. Anchoring their blueline crew are Mike Wegleitner and Greg Moberg both of whom are experienced defencemen. Wegleitner toiled with Wings of the Western Hockey League last season while Moberg was a steady performer with Burnaby Bluehawks of the BCJHL Coastal Division.

Packers have at least four other players with major junior experience in their lineup as well as a handful of others with several years of junior A hockey experience. The result has been a rapid rise to respectability for the fledgling Packers.

Game time tonight is 8 p.m. at Civic arena.