

Knights could reign supreme

Unless I miss my guess Penticton Knights are on a collision course with the Centennial Cup next month.

Knights are the defending Western Canadian Junior A champions and were Centennial Cup finalists in 1985. Judging by the way they've been manhandling Winnipeg South Blues in the first two games of the best-of-seven Western Canadian final this time around it's already a safe bet they'll repeat as the champs on this side of Upper Canada (Ontario to the uneducated in Canadian History).

In fact, after watching the B.C. Junior Hockey League champs go through Blues like a hot knife through butter earlier this week, I'd say they are just about two games shy of their water mark for last season at this time.

Forget for a moment that the next five games, if necessary, will all take place in Winnipeg. After convincing wins of 8-2 and 10-1 on consecutive nights in the Peach City Monday and Tuesday, I don't believe for a moment that the Blues have anything left to show Knights in Winnipeg.

The most impressive characteristic about Knights is their uncanny ability to keep their mental toughness throughout an entire contest. They

have power and depth at every position yet they wait and wait for the right opportunity before they go for the throat. In the interim they usually wear down their opposition with a punishing checking game or else they break their spirits with relentless and highly effective fore-checking.

With Speedsters Lee Davidson and David Shields up front taking care of the aforementioned duties it's virtually impossible for the Penticton club to get into penalty difficulty. Even with a two-man disadvantage the Okanagan junior club is a dangerous offensive threat and the number of short-handed goals they've pumped past their various opposition so far this playoff season can testify to that.

Bear in mind also, that this isn't exactly the same Penticton club that the good folks in the area got used to seeing in the regular BCJHL season. Knights are tough enough under those circumstances, but come playoff time they put on an entirely different face. Their mean players get meaner, the fast ones get faster and everyone else does the job he's cut out to do. In short they show tremendous discipline even under the toughest of pressure situations. Two losses in the past 21 playoff games is proof enough of this. When



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Knights smell blood—it's game over.

Knights added some new faces late in the season with the most notable being defenceman Kevin Melrose. Melrose was taken by Calgary Flames in the 1984 amateur draft and then spent a full season and a half with North Dakota University on a scholarship program before he said goodbye to the college hockey life and headed back to Penticton this spring. His presence on the blueline gives the Knights the essential ingredient they were lacking from last year's Centennial Cup finalist squad.

Last year the club had the multi-talented Ian Kidd acting as quarterback on the blueline. Kidd engineered most of the work inside the offensive zone on the power-plays and shut down

the opposition while killing penalties. When the club got into difficulty on the ice Kidd was around to smooth things out and get the play organized once again.

Ditto the presence of Melrose. However, the talented defenceman is just one of a half dozen burly Knights' defenders. As the Blues are finding out this week, it's pretty tough sledding around the front of the Penticton goalmouth... so much so that it's rapidly become an unpopular place to park one's hide unless he fancies a lot of bruises on his body.

Scoring depth is what Knights are really about, though. The club has three lines each of which is capable of filling the net. The bonus is that each line does a good job of forechecking and back-checking as well. Monday night, once the game really got rolling, Blues were hard-pressed to get out of their own zone. It doesn't take long for frustration to take its toll when this kind of thing is going on and Knights are waiting to pounce on mistakes when that frustration sets in.

Another measure that will add up to Knights' success is their experience. With eight players held over from last year's club, Knights have a lot of experience at this level of play.

Perhaps the most useful lesson the club learned last year had nothing to do with their play on the ice, however. Kidd turned 20 years of age the day of the championship final in Orillia, Ont. last year. From midnight on the previous evening of the game he was no longer eligible to play junior hockey with the penalty being the loss of a whole year of scholarship eligibility. There's simply no doubt that his presence in the final game could have, and probably would have, resulted in a Penticton victory.

There'll be no such hard luck for Knights this season however. Barring injury to any of their key players it will take a hell of a hockey club to throw this team off their stride.

There's a little more on the line this season too. Coach Rick Kozuback is rumored to be leaving the team for a position as coach with a U.S. college team though there's been no verification of this at this point. Naturally Kozuback wouldn't want to go public with any such information at a time like this, but if it is true it means he'd very likely want to have his name engraved on the Centennial Cup as a fitting going-away present.

The way things look to me they could start engraving right now.