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Selects top province thanks to double-overtime thriller

by CASSIDY DANKOCHIK

It took some extra work, but the Eastman Selects female U18 AAA team are provincial champions.

Sophia Heidinger struck a minute into double-overtime during the winner-takes-all game five of the Mantioba Female Hockey League finals, powering the Selects to a 2-1 win over the Winnipeg Avros in Niverville March 29.

With Avros star goaltender Adriana Almeida at the top of her crease battling for a rebound, the puck bounced below the goal-line, where Heidinger was waiting, slipping a wraparound into the back of the net and setting off jubilant celebrations inside a packed Niverville Rec Centre.

"I'm not usually a wraparound-type of person, but I saw it and had to take the opportunity," Heidinger said after the game.

"I never thought I'd be the person to put it in the net."

Despite playing for the losing team, Almeida was named the league's playoff most valuable player, as she kept the Avros in every game, posting consecutive shutouts to force game five in the first place.

Abby Dixon is the Selects team captain and was left struggling for words in the aftermath.

"It doesn't even feel like life right now," she said.

"I don't even feel anything right now, it's crazy."

There was no doubt the game would be a low-scoring affair, as both teams clamped down throughout the series. After 2-1 sand 3-0 wins for Eastman to open the series, the Avros stormed back with a pair of 2-0 victories to force a decisive game five.

That meant every play held massive weight for the players.

"Everybody knew every shift we had to go," Dixon said.

"We just locked in and worked hard every shift."

Head coach Laird Laluk said he liked the way the Selects were playing in game five, out-shooting the Avros 49-34 over the course of the game and coming back from an early 1-0 deficit mid-way through the second period.

"I thought we were doing a good job of keeping them to the outside for the most part and making sure their star players weren't sprung loose," Laluk said.

"We believed in this group. From day one, we thought we had a special team. We didn't know how special it was going to be."

Laluk said he wasn't surprised to see the team bounce back from a 1-0 deficit and win while staring down a potential blown 2-0 series lead.

"They're the most mentally strong group I've ever coached," he said.

"They pick each other up, they push each other, they hold each other accountable."

Both Laluk and Dixon credited a mid-season tournament win in Ontario as a turning point for the team, with the coach calling it the team's "coming out party."

"We did so well there," Dixon said.

"We knew if we kept pushing together, working hard together, we could do great things together. This is unreal."

Laluk was quick to credit the entire AAA female Selects infrastructure for the victory. The U15 AAA Selects played game five in their final against Central Plains April 2, with the game finishing after press time.

"We're lucky our programs are feeding up and coming into U18 and our players are ready to compete at this level," Laluk said.

By winning the league, the Selects advance to the Esso Cup West Regional, playing against the Saskatoon Stars in Saskatchewan. The winner of the best-of-three series, advances to the national Esso Cup, hosted in Lloydminster this year.

"The reward for every win is a tougher game tomorrow," Laluk said.

"We're going to go to Saskatchewan, we're going to do our best, we're going to play hard. This has been a special season, they should be proud of themselves."

The team will be updating their Manitoba-based fans on social media throughout the series, with games April 4, 5 and 6, if necessary.

For more photos from game five, be sure to check out the Carillon Sports Second Shots, published every Wednesday at thecarillon.com/sports.



CASSIDY DANKOCHIK *THE CARILLON*

Adriana Almeida was heroic in net for the Avros, even named playoff MVP after the series, but couldn't stop a Sophia Heidinger wraparound in double-overtime of a winner-takes-all game 5.



CASSIDY DANKOCHIK *THE CARILLON*

Captain Abby Dixon brings the championship trophy back to her waiting teammates.



CASSIDY DANKOCHIK *THE CARILLON*

Sophia Heidinger, who scored the series-winning goal in double overtime, celebrates with goaltender Isabelle Labossiere after the game.

Pistons fall in MJHL quarterfinals

by CASSIDY DANKOCHIK

Dreams of breaking in the Southeast Event Centre with a championship season were dashed March 31, as the Steinbach Pistons dropped game six of their series against the Portage Terriers, losing in the quarterfinals four games to two.

A back-breaking short-handed goal doomed any chances for Steinbach to force a winner-takes-all game seven, with Decker Mujcin finishing a beautiful passing play to give the Terriers the edge they needed.

Scott Cousins showed incredible patience on the series-winner, faking the shot to freeze the first Steinbach defender, then laying a pass to Mujcin between two more Pistons, who had just enough space to rip a wrist shot past Christian Green.

"Short-handed goals so often seem to impact the outcome of the game as they can have a deflating effect," head coach and general manager Paul Dyck said a day after the loss.

"It was their second one of the series and very timely for them. Unfortunately our powerplay went cold at the wrong time and we were not able to offset the short-handed goal."

Steinbach celebrated what appeared to be a Sam Noad third-period tip-in tying goal, only for referees to wave it off, ruling Sam Noad had used a high stick to knock the puck into the net.

From there, Mitchell Kathler stood tall in net, as he had all series, stopping 38 shots in game six to help Portage advance.

Steinbach's best chance aside from the disallowed goal to tie the game may have came off the stick of Connor Paronuzzi, the league's leading scorer in the regular season.

Late in the second period, the Pistons took advantage of an icing to hem the Terriers in their own zone for a shift, with Paronuzzi twice possessing the puck right in front of the Portage net, but was unable to solve Kathler with either a shot or a pass.

Steinbach forced a game six by winning game five on home ice, with Ty Paisley and Zhenya Miles striking in the first period to power the Pistons to victory.

Two games in the series were the difference, with a terrible performance from Steinbach in game three on home ice, followed by a heart-breaking game four loss in Portage March 28.

Dyck said he thought game three had a bigger impact on the series than other results.

"We were never able to get anything going and didn't play with pace," he said when asked what went wrong for the team in game three.

"It was one of the few games this year where a lack of discipline was a factor for our team. It is hard to gain traction in a game against a team as strong as Portage when you spent a third of the game in the box."

Steinbach took a 2-0 lead in the second period of game five, powered by goals from Brett Kaiser and Connor Paronuzzi, before the Terriers stormed back to take a 3-2 lead. While Mathis Laplante would tie the game, Cousins gave the home side the victory 10 minutes into the second overtime.

Caleb Lepitre drove wide on a partial three-on-two rush, getting a step on a Steinbach defender and flipping the puck out front to a cutting Cousins, who one-timed the puck home from in tight.

The series featured the second and third-ranked teams in the Manitoba Junior Hockey League, as the league stays in division in the first round of the playoffs. With Winkler storming to a first place finish in the East Division, the Pistons and Terriers were forced to play in the first round of the playoffs.

Dyck said the series lived up to its billing, with two of the league's top three teams battling for every inch.

"It's the difficulty we all face in our division with the strength of the teams in it," Dyck said.

"Not the ending we envisioned but there are still a lot of positives we will take from the season with this group of guys as time passes."

The Pistons will hold their year-end banquet at the Pat Porter Centre April 3.

For more on the Niverville Nighthawks series loss to the Winkler Flyers, check out page 2B of The Carillon.



CASSIDY DANKOCHIK *THE CARILLON*

Shane Burns cuts up the ice during Steinbach's game five win over Portage March 29.



CASSIDY DANKOCHIK *THE CARILLON*

Mitchell Kathler was excellent for Portage throughout their first round win over Steinbach, stopping 195 of the 208 shots he faced in the Terriers 4-2 series win.