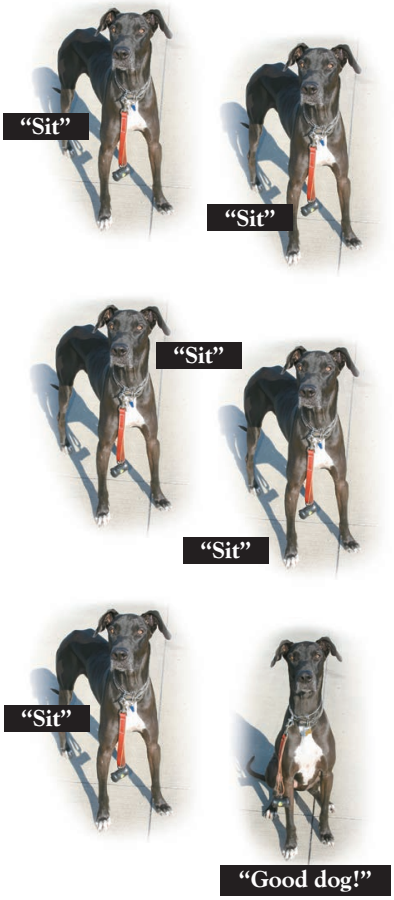
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Photo contributed

Lethbridge Hurricanes won the inaugural Alberta U11 AA provincial hockey championship, defeating Wainwright Polar Kings in the championship game.

Fort Macleod youth helps Hurricanes win provincials

FRANK MCTIGHE
GAZETTE EDITOR

A Fort Macleod defenceman helped the Lethbridge Hurricanes make Alberta hockey history.

Nolan Needham and the Hurricanes beat Wainwright Polar Kings 6-3 March 30 in Strathmore to win the first-ever U11 AA provincial championship.

"It was amazing and fun," 11-year-old Nolan said of winning the provincial title. "My team and I have worked hard all year long and we had a goal in mind and it was to bring home the provincial championship. It was nice to have my family and friends with me."

Needham played the previous season with the Fort Macleod Mavericks in the Central Alberta Tier 4 U11 Hockey League, scoring 28 goals and assisting on seven in 16 games.

The five foot one, 85-pound Grade 5 student at W.A. Day school decided to try out for AA to push himself and develop his game further.

"I have lots of friends who also play in Lethbridge and I was hoping to play with them," Nolan added.

The championship capped an impressive run by the Hurricanes in the inaugural season of the 48-team Alberta U11 AA Hockey League.

The Hurricanes were dominant, winning all 24 regular season games to place first in the South Yellow Conference with 48 points.

The Hurricanes outscored their opponents 331-44 during the regular season.

The Hurricanes were made up of players from Lethbridge, Fort Macleod and Picture Butte. Head coach was Riley Parker.

Nolan noticed a difference early in the move to AA hockey from Tier 4.

"It is a much faster game and challenging," Nolan said. "I am a defence player, and it pushed me to make quicker decisions while on the ice and to trust in my teammates."

It was a busy season, with two practices a week in Lethbridge and one every second week in Picture Butte on top of the games and four tournaments, but Nolan had plenty of support.

"My mom and dad and awesome coaches from Lethbridge all supported me," Nolan said. "My team turned into my family and we all supported each other and had the best year. I'm going to miss them."

In 24 regular season games, Nolan scored 10 goals and assisted on 21 for 31 points. He picked up just six penalty minutes.

In the South Yellow Conference semifinals, Lethbridge swept Taber 5-1 and 8-0.

In the conference final the Hurricanes suffered their first loss of the season, a 7-5 loss to Medicine Hat.

The Hurricanes rebounded to beat Medicine Hat 7-2 and 7-2 to win the series and advance to the south division championship.

In that final series, the Hurricanes beat Red Deer Chiefs 3-1 and 5-0 to join the league's top eight teams in the provincial championship tournament.

Lethbridge Hurricanes, Wainwright Polar Kings, Strathcona Warriors and Springbank Rockies made up the tournament's Pool B.

Lakeland Panthers, Red Deer Chiefs, Leduc Roughnecks and Wheatland Hawks made up Pool A.

In round-robin, the Hurricanes opened with a 6-3 win over Springbank on March 27 and then thumped Strathcona 12-2 the following day.

In their final round-robin game the Hurricanes beat Wainwright 11-1 to finish 3-0 to place first in their pool.

As the top team in Pool B, the Hurricanes crossed over to play Red Deer Chiefs, who were second in Pool A with two wins and a loss, in the semifinals.

The Hurricanes doubled the Chiefs 6-3 to advance to the championship game against Wainwright, who got past Lakeland 4-1 in the other semifinal.

Wainwright struck first in the championship game, taking a 1-0 lead just 5 1/2 minutes into the contest.

The Hurricanes got goals from Ford Fabro and Beau Watson and held a 2-1 lead going into the break.

Wainwright tied the game just over two minutes into the second period, but Jordy Illerbrun's goal 13 seconds later restored the Hurricanes' lead.

Fabro scored back-to-back goals to put Lethbridge up 5-2 mid way through the third period.

Wainwright got a powerplay goal mid way through the period, but Lethbridge closed out the scoring two minutes later with a goal by Rhett Schooten.

In the 12 playoff games, Nolan had a goal and three assists for four points and two penalty minutes.

After a provincial championship caliber season, Nolan is looking forward to next year.

"I will hopefully keep playing elite hockey in Lethbridge whether that's on a AAA or AA team," Nolan said.



Photo contributed

Nolan Needham of Fort Macleod played for the Lethbridge Hurricanes in the inaugural season of the Alberta U11 AA Hockey League.