St. Paul Bengals bantam football team wins fourth consecutive provincial championship

MARIO CABRADILLA
Lakeland This Week

ST. PAUL – The St. Paul Bengals won the provincial bantam championship title in the 9-A-Side category, after a close victory against the Grande Prairie Norsemen, 29-27, on Nov. 15 in Grande Prairie.

This would be the fourth consecutive championship for the team, to which the Bengals' head coach Derek Zapisocki, acknowledged a big accomplishment that "does not happen very often."

Since Alberta's provincial bantam football championships began in 1993, only the Bengals and the Sherwood Park Rams won four times in a row of all the tier categories.

Recalling the game against the Norsemen, "It was a nail biter," said Zapisocki.

He said the Bengals had a big lead going into halftime and, "To [the Norsemen's] credit, they kept fighting and made it a game right down to the wire."



Supplied photo

During the 9-A-Side provincial bantam football championship held in Grande Prairie on Nov. 15, the St. Paul Bengals defended its provincial title after defeating the Grande Prairie Norsemen, 29-27.

"But our boys showed up, made big plays when we needed to, and they came home with a victory," said Zapisocki.

The coach thanked everyone's support for the Bengals throughout the season, from the community members and parents who showed up whenever they could. "We have a tremendous parent group behind us," said the coach.

And of course, he thanked the players. "On behalf of all the coaches, we're just incredibly proud of what they turned into," he said. "They put in the work. They got better all year," and it all paid off, he added.

With the season over, it's time for some rest. But looking ahead, Zapisocki said he is always looking forward to what the next season will bring.

"We graduate quite a few kids again this year and we're [going to] need more players," said Zapisocki. "Anybody who wants to come play football . . . everyone's welcome."

Football is a sport that teaches accountability and discipline, said Zapisocki. "We're not easy on them [and] they have to put in a lot of hard work."

And when the players eventually face difficult moments in life in the future, "They can look back and hopefully know that they can put in the work and they can do good things," Zapisocki said.

Bonnyville Jr. A Pontiacs win 5-4 at home in front of big crowd at Kids Hockey Night

CHRISTIAN ROACH
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BONNYVILLE – The Bonnyville Jr. A Pontiacs won 5-4 against the Grande Prairie Storm at home on Nov. 15 in front of a large crowd at Kids Hockey Night, by Lakeland Credit union, where anyone under 18 was given free admission.

After a scoreless first period, both teams came out strong with high energy in the second period. The Pontiacs did damage first with a goal by Ben Constantino just over four minutes into the second period. Brandon De Haas of the Storm evened things at 1-1 a minute and a half later

Head Coach of the Bonnyville Jr. A Pontiacs, Chad Mercier, said his team didn't get off to the start he wanted, but eventually found their groove.

"I just didn't think our energy and our emotional engagement into the game was where it needed to be – it's kind of the second night that happened," said Mercier.

"You go through ebbs and flows, and we came off a stretch of three or four weeks where we've been really good off the start, and it's funny that we lose those games, and these games we find a way to win," said Mercier.

At 6:26 into the second, Maxwell Pendy netted a goal for the Pontiacs, followed by another fifteen seconds later by Grayson Niehaus, putting the Pontiacs ahead 3-1.

Will Harris scored for the Grande Prairie Storm on a powerplay with just under 12 minutes on the scoreboard to end the period 3-2.



Christian Roach photo

Levi Green signs a fans jersey after the Bonnyville Pontiacs defeated the Grande Prairie Storm on Nov. 15.

During intermission, the crowd tossed frisbees onto the rink, aiming for spots at centre ice with prizes, as part of Kids Hockey Night. The first 350 people who were at the game also got free popcorn as part of the event.

Just 27 seconds into the third, Maxim Shushkov found the back of the net to give the Bonnyville Pontiacs a 4-2 lead.

A push by the Storm led to a goal by Max Leduc brought the Storm back into the game and only down one goal with half of the period left.

Mercier said goaltending, by Ryley Budd, was key to keep the Pontiacs in the game and in the lead despite penalty trouble,while the Storm pushed to even the game throughout the third period.



Christian Roach photo

Maxim Shushkov greets excited fans after the Pontiacs won 5-4 against the Storm on Nov. 15.

"In the third I thought we were fine until we got into penalty trouble, and our goalie took over," said Mercier.

"At the end of the day, he wears the same colour jersey as we do and he's part of the team. I don't care any team you look at – as good as the Florida Panthers are, they're only as good their goaltending."

Maxwell Pendy scored an empty net goal with less than 1:30 left on the clock, to give the Pontiacs a 5-3 lead. The storm had one final push with another goal by Max Leduc with 26 seconds left in the game.

The Pontiacs and strong goaltending held back the Storm for the final seconds of the game to give the Pontiacs a 5-4 win at home.