

## Leeds Knights 5-3 Peterborough Phantoms: First win of 2024 at The Castle (6th January 2024)

Saturday night was the perfect start to the new year for the Morley Glass Leeds Knights; the first game of 2024, the first win of 2024, and the first hat-trick of 2024.

It was set to be a tough test to begin the year as third-placed, Peterborough Phantoms, were welcomed to The Castle for the second time this season in the first game of the weekend double-header.

The Knights were coming into the game nine points clear of the Phantoms, and as league leaders following their comprehensive 9-3 win on New Year's Eve at iceSheffield against Yorkshire rivals, Sheffield Steeldogs, that took them to five games unbeaten.

Despite ending 2023 with a defeat to Raiders IHC, the Peterborough Phantoms were back to winning ways on New Year's Day, starting the year as they hoped to go on with a 3-2 victory on home ice.

It was immediate good news for Knights fans who were pleased to see that Jordan Griffin was back in the line-up after being side-lined for numerous games with a lower-body injury.

Ryan Aldridge's starting line-up consisted of #31 Sam Gospel in net alongside #54 Noah McMullin and #14 Lewis Baldwin in defence, and #95 Mac Howlett, #11 Matt Haywood and #41 Oli Endicott up front.

The Knights began the attack as the puck dropped but the Phantoms were equally quick to push forward in the 1st vs 3rd match up in the NIHL.

A shot from Leeds was followed by a two-minute penalty handed to #11 Scott Robson for slashing timed at 4:57, sending the Knights on their first powerplay of the evening.

Applying the pressure, captain, #12 Kieran Brown, rattled the post with #33 Jordan Marr also called into action between the pipes for the Phantoms, pulling out a save that denied the Knights from capitalising upon their powerplay opportunity.

Peterborough then looked to test Gospel in net for the Knights, but #11 Matt Haywood regained possession of the puck, getting it out of the corner in the defensive zone. #41 Oli Endicott found himself with the puck before passing to #95 Mac Howlett who had the time and space to work it past the Phantoms defence, firing home and opening the scoring at 7:43. The goal was assisted by #41 Oli Endicott and #11 Matt Haywood.

Riding the high of Howlett's goal, the Knights continued to create chances, looking dangerous in the offensive zone as #8 Bow Neely took a shot before #9 Jordan Buesa saw his effort hit the bar.

The almost sold-out Castle didn't have to wait long for the second though with #95 Mac Howlett collecting the puck, flying down the wing and shooting past Marr to double the Knights' advantage at 10:08. The goal was assisted by #41 Oli Endicott for his second of the night, and #8 Bow Neely.

The Phantoms eagerly tried to claw one back with #91 Lukas Sladkovsky hitting the post and Gospel forced to make saves to maintain his team's two-goal lead. #5 Bjorkly-Nordstrom received a two-minute minor for cross-checking at 17:08 but the Phantoms were able to kill off the penalty, returning to full strength with no additional damage being done by the Knights, ending the first period with the hosts holding a two-goal lead.

It was immediate pressure from the Knights as the second period began with Howlett looking for number three just 30 seconds in, followed by shots from #9 Jordan Buesa and #2 James Archer quickly testing Marr.

The visitors were sent on their first powerplay of the night as #3 Bailey Perre sat two minutes for hooking at 22:19.

At 22:59, #95 Mac Howlett completed his hat-trick with a short-handed goal, assisted by #54 Noah McMullin as the Knights successfully killed Perre's two-minute minor, returning to full strength unscathed as the Phantoms were unable to capitalise upon their player advantage.

Leeds were almost immediately then handed a bench penalty for too many men on the ice at 24:26 sending them back on the penalty kill for a further two minutes with #41 Oli Endicott in the Ward Hadaway penalty box. The visitors looked threatening throughout their powerplay, stealing the possession that Leeds had dominated until this point, playing the puck up the ice and forcing the Knights' defencemen to defend vigorously, but nothing was slipping past Gospel in net.

The Knights were rewarded for their strong defending when they returned to full strength at 26:26 as #8 Bow Neely extended their lead to four with a goal at 26:40, assisted by #95 Mac Howlett who sent a backhand pass across the crease for the Canadian to fire past Marr, into the top corner.

It was another penalty kill to defend for the Phantoms at 28:33 as #35 Joe Gretton sat two minutes for cross checking.

Leeds Knights captain, Kieran Brown, forced a save from Marr with the rebound falling to #6 Ethan Hehir who couldn't collect.

This was followed by some neat passing from the hosts who looked hungry to extend their lead further whilst on the powerplay; passes from Neely to Brown to Buesa pulled Marr out of position with the netminder then having to quickly move across the crease to save a shot from Brown.

Increased pressure from the visitors eventually lead to them scoring their first goal of the game at 35:24 courtesy of #19 Luke Ferrara on the breakaway, assisted by #38 Duncan Spiers and #91 Lukas Sladkovsky, but the Leeds Knights were quick to respond at 36:17 with #37 Matt Barron restoring the four-goal lead.

#12 Kieran Brown worked the puck around the Phantoms' net before playing the pass to Barron who was able to tap it home at the back post, the second assist going to #8 Bow Neely - his second the night.

The second period ended with the Knights up by four as Howlett completed his hat-trick before assisting Bow Neely, with Matt Barron also getting in on the action.

#2 James Archer received a two-minute penalty for slashing as the third and final period commenced with the Phantoms sent on the powerplay.

The visitors capitalised upon their player advantage at 43:24 with #24 Mitchell-King reducing the deficit after a scramble in front of net, assisted by #19 Luke Ferrara and #2 Tom Norton.

The Knights surged up the ice with Howlett once again testing Marr who stood strong.

At 46:21, the Phantoms scored their third after piling on the pressure. #91 Lukas Sladkovsky collected the rebound, assisted by #45 Buglass and #34 Circenis.

It was a much more intense third period with both sides battling for possession and creating chances, and with both sets of defenders desperately preventing the opposing forwards from punishing them. Marr was called upon to make a big save at 50:24 when he found himself 1 on 1 with the Knights' prolific forward, Kieran Brown, followed by the Phantoms forcing numerous saves from Gospel at the other end.

#2 James Archer sat two-minutes for holding at 54:46, his second penalty of the game, sending the Knights on the penalty kill. Taking no chances on the Phantoms powerplay, the hosts were firing the puck down the ice, clearing the potential danger. At 56:15, Kieran Brown broke away with a short-handed 1 on 1 with Marr, but it was comfortably saved.

It was a penalty for roughing handed to #95 Jasper Foster to end the game with the Knights able to hold on to the win despite a late burst of ferocity from the Phantoms in the third period.

Another two points maintains the Knights' position at the top of the NIHL table with the team looking ahead to the second game of the double-header now in Peterborough where they will look to claim a four-point weekend.

The Thermos sponsored MVPs were awarded to #45 Callum Buglass for the visitors, and #95 Mac Howlett for the Knights following his hat-trick inside 23 minutes, the first Leeds Knights hat-trick of 2024.

*Match report written by Emily Laycock*