

Leeds Knights 3-2 MK Lightning: Lightning didn't strike The Castle as Knights go seven-points clear at the top of the table (26th January 2024)

It was a top-of-the-table showdown in LS11 on Friday evening as the league leaders, Morley Glass Leeds Knights, hosted league title race competitors, MK Lightning, to a sold-out Castle in what was a physical and gruelling game. A fighting performance saw the Knights come away with the two points and extend their lead at the top of the table to seven points with a game in hand.

The Knights were coming into the game off the back of a four-point weekend with a 5-1 victory over Telford Tigers on Friday evening, followed by a win on the road as they defeated Bristol Pitbulls 7-4 at The Pound with a hat-trick from the captain, Kieran Brown, on Sunday. Milton Keynes were looking to bounce back from a 3-2 defeat at the hands of Romford Raiders on Sunday that brought their three-game weekend to an end.



Last time round

The last time the Knights hosted the Lightning at The Castle, it was a nine-goal thriller with Leeds coming out on top. Despite going behind just three minutes in with #33 Milique Martelly firing past Gospel, #41 Oli Endicott brought the game level at 6:42 on the powerplay. Knights captain, #12 Kieran Brown, scored his first of the night to give Leeds the lead early in the second period, but #10 Toms Rutkis quickly found a way to bring the visitors back on level terms at 25:23. Milton Keynes restored their lead through #71 Harry Gulliver, former Leeds Knights two-way forward, at 35:53 before an altercation in front of the benches resulted in a five-on-three powerplay in the Knights' favour - Kieran Brown capitalised upon the player advantage, scoring his second. #9 Jordan Buesa gave the Knights the lead two minutes later with #11 Matt Haywood making it 5-3 at 51:00. Fighting for a way back into the game, MK pulled their netminder in favour of an extra skater and Brown finished off his hat-trick with an empty net goal, sealing the two points as the third period was brought to a close.

First period (1-0)

With #24 Dylan Hehir missing out through suspension and #19 Innes Gallacher and #26 Tommy Spraggon not icing, the Knights lined up with a squad of 17+2 led out by #31 Sam Gospel starting in between the pipes. Milton Keynes iced with a squad of 18+2 with #4 Archie Sailsbury and #1 Jordan Hedley returning, #31 William Kerlin starting in net.

The puck was dropped with #54 Noah McMullin, #14 Lewis Baldwin, #41 Oli Endicott, #33 Finn Bradon and #6 Ethan Hehir joining Gospel on the ice.

It was an even start to the game with both sets of players battling for possession of the puck and no clear-cut chances for either side until five minutes in when #95 Mac Howlett tried to slot the puck in at the near post, but Kerlin was able to collect. Howlett tried again only seconds later as the MK goalie was forced to make another

block with the next chance falling to #14 Lewis Baldwin whose shot through traffic was blocked by the defencemen before Kerlin had to act.

#7 Robert Herrman took the action down the other end as he looked to relieve the pressure from his team's defensive zone, firing shots at net that Gospel was able to block. #14 Dillon Lawrence found himself through on goal but fired his shot over before #7 Robert Herrman got on the end of a pass played straight through the centre, his shot calling Gospel into action. An incredible glove save from the Knights' number one after a shot from #93 Ben Brown, settled the game for a few minutes until the Endicott-Bradon-Hehir line entered the ice with a battle for possession in centre ice leading to #41 Oli Endicott going close to opening the scoring on the breakaway at 11:20.

At 12:34, #25 Edward Knaggs received a two-minute penalty for tripping sending the Knights on their first powerplay of the night with #95 Mac Howlett seizing the opportunity of being five-on-four, flying up the ice and firing the hosts ahead at 13:05. The powerplay goal was assisted by #37 Matt Barron and #54 Noah McMullin.



As the period entered the final five minutes, the Lightning increased the pressure with #8 Liam Stewart playing the puck across the face of goal but nobody was there to tap it home followed by #17 Corey McEwan finding himself one-on-one with Gospel - a massive save from #31 Sam Gospel maintained the Knights' lead.

The final chance of the first 20-minutes was #91 Jake Witkowski's as he forced a pad save at the near post from Kerlin with his shot. The Knights went into the break with a one-goal lead courtesy of #95 Mac Howlett, despite only troubling Kerlin with nine shots as opposed to the Lightning striking Gospel with 19.

Second period (2-1)

#9 Jordan Buesa got the Knights off to the perfect start in the second period as he fired the puck from the corner into the crease to the waiting #91 Jake Witkowski, but Kerlin directed it into his own net with his skate on the way through before it could reach Witkowski, extending the hosts' lead to two goals at 22:28.

At 23:58, #6 Ethan Hehir burst forward with the puck, passing to #33 Finn Bradon in front of goal but he couldn't get a shot off. #95 Mac Howlett tried to double his tally at 14:30 but his shot went wide before a hit from distance rebounded off the pads of Kerlin, falling to #12 Kieran Brown who was there waiting to collect but he couldn't control the puck before the Lightning's goalie was pouncing to collect.

Losing possession in their defensive zone, Milton Keynes presented #11 Matt Haywood with the perfect opportunity to extend his team's lead further at 26-minutes with a shot from the edge of the face-off circle, but Kerlin did enough to block the shot with his defence clearing the danger further.

A penalty for interference was given to #91 Jake Witkowski at 26:34 sending the Knights on the penalty kill. It was a powerplay goal for the visitors at 27:30 with #14 Dillon Lawrence's shot finding its way through traffic and into the back of Gospel's net, assisted by #7 Robert Herrman.

Leeds were only back to full strength for two minutes before #54 Noah McMullin was sent to the Ward Hadaway penalty box for holding at 31:14. The penalty was successfully killed with the Lightning unable to capitalise upon their player advantage. #41 Oli Endicott was immediately in the offensive zone creating a chance for Leeds to restore their two-goal lead but a collision with #21 Ross Green forced him to lose possession - the puck landed perfectly in front of #6 Ethan Hehir who shot from one-on-one with Kerlin but was denied by the crossbar at 34:22.

#12 Kieran Brown fed the puck to #95 Mac Howlett at 35:01 with his backhanded shot going just wide of goal before Gospel had to make himself big to make an important save as the visitors found themselves on the breakaway.

Picking the puck up in the neutral zone, #33 Matt Barron played a pass to #95 Mac Howlett who tried to play it back to the Canadian-forward in a one-two but was dispossessed as MK looked to break away down the other end, forcing Gospel into another save as the period was brought to a close with the Knights leading by two goals to one.

Third period (3-2)

The third period began with the puck almost immediately in the back of the Lightning's net at 42:54, but Haywood's shot was disallowed after Kerlin's helmet had come loose.

#11 Matt Haywood wasted no time in ripping the back of the net again - this time, the goal stood. #44 Jordan Griffin fired the puck at Kerlin from distance with the goalie tipping the puck behind his net to #9 Jordan Buesa. The forward played an unbelievable pass behind the net to #11 Matt Haywood at the back door - he fired the puck into the roof of the net at 43:39 with the second assist awarded to #91 Jake Witkowski.

With five minutes of the period played and a two-goal lead reinstated, #95 Mac Howlett broke forward assisted by #8 Bow Neely, but nothing came of the possession in the offensive zone before the visitors were back to attacking in Gospel's direction. It was a block, then a catch from the netminder before Stewart fired the puck into Gospel's glove at 49:12.

At 51:43, #16 Mackenzie Stewart received two-minutes for slashing with the Knights creating chances to score a powerplay goal, none of which could be converted. As the visitors returned to full strength, they were quickly sent on another penalty kill as #66 Lewis Christie sat two-minutes for tripping at 54:47. There were chances for the Knights again as they controlled the puck in the Lightning's defensive zone, but the visitors managed to weave the puck into the neutral zone before #14 Dillon Lawrence and #59 Ross Venus combined to score a delayed shorthanded goal at 56:18, getting their side within one with three minutes left to play.

It was a chaotic final few minutes as Milton Keynes continuously applying the pressure, searching for an equalising goal to send the game to overtime. Sending Kerlin to the bench in favour of an extra skater as the clock ran down the seconds, the Lightning left their net empty and continued to shoot at Gospel who was making insane saves, one after the other, as the Knights did well to keep their composure and see the game out.

