

Leeds Knights 6-0 Telford Tigers: Victory at The Castle (11th February 2024)

After back-to-back away games, the Morley Glass Leeds Knights returned to The Castle on Sunday as they hosted Telford Tigers in the NIHL. The Knights secured a 5-4 overtime win on Friday in London against the Raiders and were unlucky to be defeated by the Wildcats in Swindon on Saturday in their second game of the weekend after a brilliant game of hockey between first and third, but four points were collected from a possible six when they bounced back with a 6-0 win over Telford on Sunday evening.

Last time round

When the Tigers were last welcomed to The Castle, the Knights were victorious in a 5-1 win that saw them extend their lead at the top of the NIHL table to five points. There was only one goal in the first period, and it was scored by the visitors, but the second period saw Leeds produce a terrific comeback started off by #24 Dylan Hehir who scored the equalising goal. #12 Kieran Brown fired into the top left corner to give the Knights their second followed by the man of the match, #54 Noah McMullin firing through traffic to make it 3-1 before the break. There was no shortage of goals in the third period either as both #9 Jordan Buesa and #11 Matt Haywood scored empty net goals to round off their impressive performance at The Castle.



First period (1-0)

Whilst #3 Bailey Perre didn't ice for the Knights, #2 James Archer, #19 Innes Gallacher and #34 Gregor Mills returned with the Knights led out by #31 Sam Gospel who started in between the pipes, whilst #34 Matty Bloor started in net for the visitors.

The Knights were immediately on the front foot in LS11 with #37 Matt Barron pressurising Telford in their defensive zone just 30 seconds in before dispossessing the Telford defencemen at 02:43 to allow the captain #12 Kieran Brown to open the scoring. Collecting the puck, Brown went around his man before firing into the top far corner over the shoulder of #34 Matty Bloor.

Searching for a quick reaction, Telford broke forwards at 5:15 forcing Gospel to make a block with his pads, but the danger was dealt with well by the hosts and #95 Mac Howlett was immediately back on the attack with his shot just wide at 5:35. Continued pressure from the Knights who looked to double their advantage early in the first period saw #9 Jordan Buesa brilliantly draw the Telford defenceman to him before feeding the puck to #19 Innes Gallacher whose shot was so close to rippling the back of the net.

At 14:45, #11 Matt Haywood received a two-minute penalty for hooking sending the Tigers on the powerplay, but they couldn't capitalise upon their player advantage despite hitting the post and causing a scramble in front

of the Knights goal that forced Gospel into an uneasy save. Leeds returned to full strength unscathed at 16:45 with the period coming to an end with Bloor having being tested with 15 shots, easily the busier of the two netminders as Gospel only saw three shots come his way.

Second period (5-0)

Beginning the second period as they had ended the first with energy and intensity, the Knights were eagerly seeking their second goal of the night, but the first troublesome chance came in favour of the visitors as the puck rebounded before dropping into the crease for a Tiger's player to poke beyond Gospel at 21:10, but they couldn't take advantage of the golden opportunity and the Knights' captain was quick to relieve the pressure on his team's defenceman the first chance he got, working the puck back into the offensive zone with a massive chance to double his tally at 23:00.

Telford were beginning to grow into the game with the puck up and down the ice and both sides creating chances, but their rhythm was disrupted when #36 Adams sat two-minutes for tripping at 24:14 sending the Knights on the powerplay. With two seconds left on the powerplay, #95 Mac Howlett lit the lamp, firing the puck into the roof of the net at 26:12 after #11 Matt Haywood threaded an incredible pass through traffic to reach him on the right – the second assist went to #8 Bow Neely. The goal helped Howlett to reach his 22nd goal and 45th point of the season.

It took only three minutes for #95 Mac Howlett to work the puck past Bloor again; having won the puck from a face-off in the offensive zone, Howlett played the puck off the boards to #41 Oli Endicott who worked it around Bloor's net before pulling it back to the waiting Howlett who doubled his tally on the night at 29:43, the second assist going to #6 Ethan Hehir. There was an opportunity for an almost carbon copy of Howlett's goal just seconds later followed by a huge chance for #12 Kieran Brown as the Knights dispossessed the Tigers in the offensive zone, but his shot missed the target, and the visitors were back up the other end testing Gospel who was forced to make a save at 31:35.



Constant pressure from the hosts saw #34 Matty Bloor in net for the Tigers spill his save presenting #41 Oli Endicott with an opportunity to get his name on the scoresheet, but he couldn't capitalise on the chance at 33:33 with the next chance falling to Howlett at 33:47, his shot heading straight for the top corner and forcing Bloor to make an incredible high glove save. Head coach Ryan Aldridge praised the two forwards in his post-match interview saying: *“Mac and Oli found a way to come together tonight and score some nice goals [...] just that connection tonight was good, they were actually excited to play together.”*

Having scored his first goal only eight minutes prior, #95 Mac Howlett sealed his hat-trick as he netted the Knights' fourth goal at 34:30, assisted by #24 Dylan Hehir and #41 Oli Endicott.

The Tigers then had an opportunity to test the defence of the Knights at 35:52 as #54 Noah McMullin received two-minutes for tripping sending them on the powerplay, but the hosts successfully killed the penalty with good defending and were quick to light the lamp again, this time courtesy of #41 Oli Endicott at 38:35. From Hehir to Buesa, the latter fired the puck across the slot from the left to find #41 Oli Endicott who shot past Bloor to make it 5-0 to the Knights.

Third period (6-0)

The Tigers began the third period on the powerplay after #41 Jordan Griffin had received a two-minute penalty late on in the second period for hooking, however the visitors couldn't find their way past Gospel despite playing 1:57 with the player advantage.

When #41 Oli Endicott sat two-minutes for tripping at 46:10, Telford were once again in a prime position to score but determination from the Knights to clinch the two-points saw them defend strategically and clear the danger. Despite the Tigers being five-on-four, it was the Knights who scored with #11 Matt Haywood scoring an incredible shorthanded goal, assisted by #95 Mac Howlett. The hat-trick scorer played it to Haywood in the crease with the Knights' number 11 working it towards goal, weaving past orange shirts and slipping it past Bloor at the back door to bring the Knights a six-goal victory at home.

There were chances for both sides as the game entered the final few minutes, but #32 Harrison Walker stood tall in between the pipes for Leeds as they ended their three-game weekend with two well-deserved points. Aldridge commented after the game: "I thought we played with a smile on our faces tonight, especially the last two periods."

The win saw the Knights end their weekend having claimed four out of six points with incredible character shown on Sunday evening to bounce back from their defeat in Swindon. The Thermos Sponsored MVPs were awarded to #95 Mac Howlett for the hosts, and to #34 Matty Bloor for the visitors. Their next challenge comes this weekend with a double-header against fifth-placed, Peterborough Phantoms, and Knights fans will see the return of #91 Jake Witkowski to the squad.

Match report written by Emily Laycock

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