

Leeds Knights 9-7 Swindon Wildcats: Kieran Brown reaches 100-points in 16-goal thriller at The Castle (3rd March 2024)

A heated 16-goal thriller at The Castle saw Leeds Knights captain Kieran Brown reach 100 points in the 23/24 NIHL season with 54 goals and 46 assists as the hosts claimed a four-point weekend and edged even closer to lifting the trophy.

The Knights came into the game having been victorious over Solway Sharks in Dumfries the previous night with goals from #8 Bow Neely, #12 Kieran Brown, #41 Oli Endicott and a brace from #11 Matt Haywood adding another two points to the tally, whilst the Wildcats had lost in a penalty shootout over the Bees.

Last time round

The last meeting between the two sides was at the Link Centre in early February and it had been quite the opposite of this 16-goal thriller with only one goal scored, courtesy of Gael Luwbwele in the 48th minute with the Wildcats claiming the two points.

First period (3-2)

The home side lined up with a squad of 17+2 led out by #31 Sam Gospel starting in between the pipes whilst the visitors iced with a squad of 15+2 as #62 Renny Marr took his position in net. #33 Finn Bradon was named February Player of the Month with two goals and seven assists followed by a touching tribute to Dayle 'Keeno' Keen prior to face-off at The Castle.



It was an early powerplay for the Knights as #3 Balint Pakozdi sat two-minutes for tripping at 0:51, but the opening goal wouldn't come until the penalty was killed by the Wildcats and they returned to full strength only to see #91 Jake Witkowski take a shot that rebounded into the path of #37 Matt Barron to fire home, assisted by #12 Kieran Brown.

Leeds continued to apply the pressure, riding the high of the first goal, as #6 Ethan Hehir forced #62 Renny Marr to make the block and deny the league leaders from doubling their advantage early.

As the game reached the eight-minute mark it had been end to end action with both teams furiously attacking and looking to test the defencemen, but Leeds maintained their advantage as #31 Sam Gospel proved how important he is to this Leeds squad once again, pulling off incredible saves to combat the Swindon offensive pressure.

The winning of a face-off in the Wildcats' defensive zone saw the Knights occupy possession of the puck in a dangerous area with #91 Jake Witkowski passing to #95 Mac Howlett at 8:15 - the forward found himself alone in front of goal, double bluffing #62 Renny Marr before sliding it past the netminder and making it 2-0 to Leeds at The Castle.



This prompted a timeout to be called by the Wildcats which appeared to have been somewhat of a success at encouraging the players because at 9:03, a Swindon forward fired a shot towards Gospel, but was denied by the post. This glimmer of hope spurred them to continue in their attack with Gospel blocking a slapshot at 10:32 before the Knights lost possession in the neutral zone at 10:17 causing Gospel to produce a glove save to deny the visitors from capitalising upon the rare opportunity of mistake in the middle from Leeds.

At 12:57, a scuffle ensued in front of the British goalie with #78 Jamie Smith being sent to the penalty box receiving two-minutes for roughing, sending the Knights on another powerplay. This time the hosts made use of their player advantage to the fullest extent: #8 Bow Neely scored a goal for the second night running having got his name on the scoresheet in Solway too, blasting the puck from the blueline past #62 Renny Marr, assisted by #41 Oli Endicott and #95 Mac Howlett to make it 3-0.

Almost immediately after returning to full strength, the Wildcats were eager to reduce the deficit with five-minutes remaining of the first period. At 15:22, a shot found the side netting, much to the delight of Knights fans within The Castle who temporarily held their breath, but the relief didn't last for long as #71 Edgars Bebris was unmarked with the puck in front of Gospel, shooting past the man in net for Leeds at 15:33, assisted by #72 Glenn Billing.

#24 Dylan Hehir received two-minutes for high sticks at 18:50 and the Wildcats were quick off the mark on the powerplay with #71 Edgars Bebris scoring his second of the night - his shot looked to take a deflection on its way into the net as the visitors got the game within one as the final minute of the first period was played.

With less than 20 seconds left on the clock, a fight in front of the penalty box saw #13 Sam Bullas receive five-minutes for fighting and two-minutes for aggressor, whilst #9 Jordan Buesa received five for fighting and two for aggressor for the Knights alongside #12 Kieran Brown sitting two-minutes for roughing, sending the home side on the penalty kill going into the second period.

Second period (8-6)

After a five goal first period, it was already set to be an interesting 40 minutes to follow. Swindon began on a five-on-four powerplay, but the Knights successfully killed the remaining time on the penalty kill and returned to full strength with the score still 3-2.

#12 Kieran Brown scored his first of the night at 23:16 and it was quite a goal to open his campaign with. Going it alone and skating behind the net, the forward pulled off the 'Michigan' and caused an eruption of cheers from The Castle.



However, it was an instant response from the visitors as #89 Tomasz Malasinski reduced the deficit to one again, assisted by #28 Stevie Whitfield.

Described by Leeds Knights head coach Ryan Aldridge after the game as a game of 'ping-pong', the puck was back in the possession of the home side and the net was ripped again as #95 Mac Howlett scored his second



of the evening; he skated up the left wing alone before firing hard and low into the far corner giving #62 Renny Marr no chance at saving it. The goal was timed at 28:52 and assisted by #37 Matt Barron and #91 Jake Witkowski.

Not even two minutes later, as both teams increased the tempo with fans not knowing which way to look as the action was end to end, #26 Gael Lubwele scored Swindon's fourth, assisted by #2 Tyler Plews and #11 Chris Jones.

In an attempt to relieve the pressure from Gospel at the back, #91 Jake Witkowski tried a shot through traffic that was unfortunately blocked, and nobody could convert the rebound into a goal allowing Swindon to retrieve the puck and clear the danger.

The persistent attacking from Leeds in the few minutes that followed paid off when #12 Kieran Brown created and scored a clever goal to take command of the game. Working the puck around the zone, the captain laid it off to #44 Jordan Griffin before getting into position for Griffin to pass back to him, tapping it into the net to make it 6-4 at 33:01.

By 34:45, the Wildcats were back to being within one again - an initial scramble in front of Gospel saw the Knights clear their lines temporarily, but #72 Glenn Billing wasted little time in bringing joy to the travelling Swindon supporters once again.

A combination between #54 Noah McMullin, who drove up the left flank, and #6 Ethan Hehir, who was waiting at the back door, brought the Knights their seventh goal as the forward tapped the puck into the net making it two in two nights following his goal on the road against the Sharks on Saturday.



The game didn't settle in tempo or aggression as the second period reached the final five minutes as #24 Tyler Plews received two-minutes for holding and #9 Jordan Buesa visited the penalty box for a second time that night receiving two+two for high sticks at 35:50.

#95 Mac Howlett was creating yet another goal scoring opportunity for the hosts shortly after, but was denied the opportunity to shoot or play the puck by a Swindon player with shouts for holding following from fans.

The captain reached 100 league points for the 23/24 season at 36:22 when he scored his third goal of the night as the game was played four-on-four, reinstating the Knights' initial three-goal lead. The Bradford-born forward reached 50 league goals last week - becoming the fastest player in the league to do so this season - and with a goal away against Solway on Saturday and a hat-trick in Leeds on Sunday, he has scored 54 goals and registered 46 assists to hit the 100-point milestone. He made history again as he became the only player in the EPL/NIHL modern era to amass 100 point and 50-goal seasons in three successive years, according to NIHL Stats.

The action of the second period didn't end there though as #26 Gael Lubwele scored on the extended powerplay for the Wildcats with #33 Finn Bradon breaking forwards just before the buzzer, but he was unable to get a shot off and a busy period of nine goals scored was brought to an end with the Knights leading by eight goals to six.

Third period (9-7)

Swindon began the third period strong with control of the puck in Leeds' defensive zone and a slapshot blocked at 40:20. #24 Tyler Plews received two-minutes for interference at 42:17, but despite the player advantage and creating the opportunities to score, the Knights couldn't find the back of the Swindon net. #33 Matt Barron shot through traffic before #91 Jake Witkowski saw his shot saved and #8 Bow Neely watched as his shot through traffic was also well-blocked to keep the score at 8-6. #95 Mac Howlett went close as he tested #62 Renny Marr from the right of the net but #41 Oli Endicott was unable to convert the chance that the rebound presented as Marr collected the puck and the Wildcats returned to full strength.

Back on the attack, #28 Stevie Whitfield fired a shot in from the blueline to make it 8-7 at 45:05. Only a minute later, #11 Matt Haywood received two-minutes for cross checking calling for an important penalty kill needed from the home side as Swindon were presented the perfect opportunity to level the score for the first time in the game - but Gospel stood strong with the Knights' defence working hard in front of him.

With Leeds having killed the penalty, Haywood was straight out of the box and into the action bringing back the two-goal lead with a tap in at the back door, assisted by #95 Mac Howlett at 49:42.

As the scoreline resembled, the game was not short of fight and desire and this was resembled once more at 55:49 as the Wildcats received penalties that sent the Knights on a five-on-three powerplay. The referees flagged up that the visitors had too many men on the ice and gave a penalty accordingly, but the call was not welcomed by the visiting side which resulted in #11 Chris Jones receiving two+ten for misconduct in addition. Leeds couldn't find a way to add another goal to the tally during the powerplay with Marr pulled by the Wildcats in favour of an extra skater at 58:33, but still no goals would be scored.

#95 Mac Howlett received a two-minute minor for unsportsmanlike conduct at 58:43 with Marr still pulled giving the visitors a two-player advantage now, but the Knights held them off and the final buzzer sounded.



It was another four-point weekend for the Morley Glass Leeds Knights who remain at the top of the NIHL National League table, eight points clear of second-placed Milton Keynes Lightning with a playoff position already confirmed.

The Thermos-sponsored MVPs were awarded to #72 Glenn Billing for Swindon Wildcats, and Leeds Knights captain #12 Kieran Brown.



Speaking after the game, Aldridge said: *“Kieran shows up in these games - he’s a big game player.”*
“In terms of the ‘Michigan’, we really needed a goal at that moment and to pull that off at that point in the game was just incredible.”

The Knights are back in action on Friday at the Link Centre as they take on the Wildcats in their first game of a three-game weekend. A double-header against Yorkshire rivals Hull Seahawks will follow on Saturday at The Castle, and then Sunday at the Hull Ice Arena.

Match report written by Emily Laycock
Photos taken by Jacob Lowe