

MK Lightning 7-4 Leeds Knights: Top-of-the-table clash in Milton Keynes (16th March 2024)

The Morley Glass Leeds Knights travelled south to face MK Lightning on Saturday evening at the Milton Keynes Arena. After a hard-fought battle between first and second, the hosts took the two points and Leeds continue their search for one more win to claim a second consecutive league title. They host Bees IHC tonight at The Castle.

The Lightning were coming into the game off the back of a double header over the Bees claiming three points with a 7-5 win at home followed by a shootout loss on the road. Leeds were travelling having had a terrific six-point weekend: their three-game weekend began with a trip to the Link Centre where they were victorious over the Swindon Wildcats, followed by a Yorkshire derby double-header over the Seahawks in which they retrieved a further four points in the title race.

Last time round

The last time these two sides faced, Leeds secured the two points and went seven-points clear at the top of the table. Goals from #95 Mac Howlett, #91 Jake Witkowski and #11 Matt Haywood led the hosts to a 3-2 victory at The Castle. The first and second placed teams have come up against each other five teams already this season with Leeds victorious on three occasions, all of which have been at The Castle, whilst the Lightning were victorious in two, both of which were at their home rink, so it would be a testing game at the Milton Keynes Arena on Saturday evening.

First period (1-0)

MK's number one, #1 Jordan Hedley started in between the pipes for the hosts whilst the Knights saw the return of #31 Sam Gospel to their squad, backed up by #32 Harrison Walker who led the team to three victories the weekend prior.

#54 Noah McMullin, #14 Lewis Baldwin, #12 Kieran Brown, #33 Finn Bradon and #37 Matt Barron got the game underway with the Knights sent on an early powerplay when the home side received a bench penalty for too many men on the ice at 1:06. At 1:59, #16 Mack Stewart received two-minutes for slashing and the game was to be played five-on-three.

Searching for an early opener, the Knights applied the pressure to the Lightning's defence, but #9 Jordan Buesa's pass across the slot could not be poked home by #11 Matt Haywood with the forward also seeing his further attempt saved at the back door as the hosts continued to kill the penalty successfully.

MK returned to full strength after a strong defensive display and some important saves made by #1 Jordan Hedley and they then obtained possession in the Knights' defensive zone allowing #7 Rory Herman to create a few chances, but #31 Sam Gospel made the saves.

As the hosts continued to apply the pressure, Gospel continued to make the blocks and deny them an opening goal. #41 Oli Endicott received a two-minute penalty for interference at 8:23 sending the Lightning on the powerplay. #16 Mack Stewart wasted no time capitalising upon his side's player advantage as he broke the



deadlock with a pass across the slot taking a deflection and finding its way past Gospel, assisted by #24 Carter Hamill and #96 Ben Solder.

Looking for a quick response, #12 Kieran Brown forced Hedley to make the save before #6 Ethan Hehir and #9 Jordan Buesa were close to equalising at 12-minutes, but MK's number one stood tall to deny them.

With three minutes of the period to play, #95 Mac Howlett danced down the ice before unleashing an effort and testing Hedley, but not enough to force him to concede and the score remained 1-0. The pressure was immediately back on Gospel as a chance for the Lightning to double their advantage before the intermission saw the Knights netminder make a crucial save.



#95 Mac Howlett and #11 Matt Haywood were linking up down the other end just moments later, trying to replicate some of the magic from last weekend's fixtures that saw the two of them score numerous goals, alongside their linemate #91 Jake Witkowski.

The clock was ticking down and Leeds were still frantically searching for a goal to tie the game, but #8 Bow Neely couldn't get on the end of #9 Jordan Buesa's pass and their control of possession in the offensive zone couldn't amount to anything with a showcase of strong defending from the home side.

#24 Dylan Hehir received two-minutes for hooking at 18:40 and the period was brought to a close with the Knights trailing by one.

Second period (2-1)

The second period began with MK on the powerplay. Despite the Knights returning to full strength unscathed, the Lightning were causing misery only a minute later with #66 Lewis Christie extending their lead at 22:24, assisted by #28 Tim Wallace and #8 Liam Stewart.

Regaining possession and trying to get a foothold in the game, Leeds began working the puck up the ice towards Hedley with #24 Dylan Hehir forcing the 27-year-old to make a glove save, but the possession would be short-lived as the visitors then received a bench penalty for too many men on the ice at 25:16 and were back on the penalty kill.

A strong defensive display with Gospel making the saves to keep his side in the game once again, saw the Lightning's pressure dismissed and Leeds returned to full strength, driving forwards through #41 Oli Endicott whose effort was blocked before #44 Jordan Griffin tried his luck: his first attempt went high, but the puck was

recycled by his team with an opportunity for a low drive falling to him, but his shot through traffic was blocked and Leeds' period of intense pressure was still yet to amount to anything.

#12 Kieran Brown tried to feed #11 Matt Haywood, but the pass was just beyond him with #37 Matt Barron forcing a pad block at 31-minutes and #41 Oli Endicott pushed off the puck before he had a chance to capitalise upon the rebound of #9 Jordan Buesa's blocked shot.

Leeds' attack was momentarily interrupted as #16 Mack Stewart received two-minutes for slashing at 32:16, but they still couldn't find a way past #1 Jordan Hedley despite #37 Matt Barron and #54 Noah McMullin increasing the intensity further.



Just as the home side returned to full strength having successfully killed the penalty, #17 Corey McEwan sat two-minutes for high stick. #91 Jake Witkowski took a shot from the left side of Hedley at 35:18, but he was denied by the post and his following shot at 35:32 was met by Hedley's chest. Incredible play from #8 Bow Neely saw him fire the puck towards the net at 36:19 allowing #95 Mac Howlett to tap it beyond Hedley in front making it a one-goal game and getting Leeds on the scoresheet.

Wanting to restore their two-goal advantage quickly, MK took control of the puck and drove towards #31 Sam Gospel

but the netminder proved why he's number one as he made the blocks and dealt with the home side's pressure well. Leeds broke forwards with two-minutes left on the clock with Hedley in net at the other end making a huge save to deny #12 Kieran Brown and #9 Jordan Buesa on the two-on-one.

#21 Ross Green received a late two-minute minor at 38:50 for holding and the Knights were back on the powerplay, but they couldn't create anything to bring the score level before the break. Despite the Lightning taking a two-goal lead at the start of the period, the visitors fought back to have the deficit and get the game within one heading into the final 20-minutes.

Third period (7-4)

Milton Keynes began on the penalty kill as #21 Ross Green served the remainder of his holding penalty, but Leeds couldn't take advantage of this and the home side were back to full strength and back to scoring at 40:58. Straight out of the penalty box, #21 Ross Green reinstated the two-goal lead picking up the pass from the box and dekeing Gospel before they were back on the penalty kill again - this time it was #24 Carter Hamill receiving two-minutes for cross-checking and Leeds were back with another powerplay goal courtesy of #37 Matt Barron who poked it home from in front.

The Knights continued to apply the pressure in the offensive zone with just a goal needed to tie the game, but #41 Oli Endicott received two-minutes for cross-checking at 46:59 and the visitors were back to defending. It took less than a minute for MK to capitalise upon their player advantage as #7 Rory Herman scored on the powerplay at 47:47, assisted by #8 Liam Stewart.

An instant response saw #11 Matt Haywood make it a one-goal game at 48:13. #12 Kieran Brown worked hard behind the net to retrieve the puck and lay it to #11 Matt Haywood in front who scored and celebrated in front of the Knights' fantastic away support.

With tensions rising in the top-of-the-table clash, #4 Archie Sailsbury received a two-minute minor for tripping, a decision #16 Mack Stewart didn't agree with resulting in him being removed from the game by the officials.

The penalties didn't end there as #24 Carter Hamill then sat two-minutes for slashing at 51:03 before #28 Tim Wallace and #41 Oli Endicott receiving coinciding penalties - five each for fighting. #37 Matt Barron was there again for the visitors to score the powerplay goal to tie things up, assisted by #11 Matt Haywood and #12 Kieran Brown for his third of the night.

The final ten minutes the Lightning dominate in terms of goals scored, but Leeds never gave up and continued to work hard to pressurise MK's defence. At 53:36, #8 Liam Stewart reinstated his side's lead before #14 Lewis Baldwin received two-minutes for tripping at 54:34.



Milton Keynes called a timeout at 57:11 allowing the Knights time to regroup and discuss tactics for a way to claw one back and hopefully get the game to overtime. #31 Sam Gospel was pulled by Ryan Aldridge with two-minutes of the period to play in favour of an extra skater, and the Lightning took full advantage of the empty net: #11 Matt Haywood made a good stick save initially, but #7 Rory Hermann found the puck and slotted it into the empty net at 59:05, with #92 Nathan Ripley also getting in on the action, tapping the puck into the empty net at the back door as he found himself with #17 Corey McEwan two-on-one.

The Knights fell to a 7-4 defeat to the Lightning, but they are still just one win away from securing back-to-back league titles, and there is a chance to do so tonight as they host Bees IHC at The Castle.

Man of the match for Leeds Knights was awarded to #37 Matt Barron with two goals at crucial points in the game, and to #8 Liam Stewart for MK Lightning.

Match report written by Emily Laycock