

Leeds Knights 6-3 Bees IHC: Back-to-back League Champions (17th March 2024)



The Morley Glass Leeds Knights became Planet Ice NIHL National Division Champions for the second season in a row with a 6-3 victory over the Bees on Sunday evening. After a disappointing game on the road with a loss to MK Lightning the evening before, the Knights were more than ready to lift that trophy in front of a packed Castle. Goals from #12 Kieran Brown, #9 Jordan Buesa, #19 Innes Gallacher, and #37 Matt Barron secured the two points on the night, and Ryan Aldridge's side were crowned champions.

Last time round

The two teams have faced each other four times this season with the Knights victorious on all four occasions. It was a 3-2 win on the road on October 1st followed by a 4-1 win on home ice on October 21st with the league leaders firing five past the Bees on November 25th and another scoring another five on December 10th. Still fighting to confirm their playoff spot, it was to be a crucial game for the Bees who look to finish ahead of 9th placed Solway Sharks.

First period (1-1)

The Knights iced with a squad of 19+2 with #26 Tommy Spraggon the only absentee and #31 Sam Gospel starting in between the pipes as the home side searched for just one more win. The visitors lined up with a squad of 15+2 opting for #36 Brett Shepherd in net, backed up by #44 Brython Preece.

#54 Noah McMullin, #14 Lewis Baldwin, #41 Oli Endicott, #6 Ethan Hehir and #2 James Archer joined Gospel as the Sunday night hockey got underway at The Castle; the Knights were immediately on the front-foot showcasing exactly why they are top of the league.

The first to go close was #33 Finn Bradon, but his effort was high of #36 Brett Shepherd. A puck was sent flying towards the Bees goal only moments later with the rebound off Shepherd's pads falling to the wrong side for Haywood to reach with the rebounded puck not capitalised upon.

#31 Sam Gospel was tested for the first real time in the game with six-minutes played as the visitors looked to counter quickly, but the Knights' number one denied them from breaking the deadlock.

Regaining possession, #12 Kieran Brown worked the puck down the right flank before cutting inside and firing a shot towards #36 Brett Shepherd from the centre of the slot, but the goalie's pads were enough to deny him. He recycled the puck, getting it under control again before producing another shot to test the Bees netminder, this time from the left, but it was the side netting that would stop the hosts' captain from opening the scoring at 6:30, and #36 Brett Shepherd was able to collect the puck before the forthcoming #6 Ethan Hehir could take advantage of the loose puck.

The Knights captain wasn't prevented for long though with a goal at 6:57 causing an eruption from The Castle. After an initial battle in the corner with #95 Mac Howlett's assistance, Brown managed to control the puck

before playing a backhand pass to #9 Jordan Buesa who turned and fed the puck back towards #14 Lewis Baldwin. The defenceman then played the puck to Canadian import #54 Noah McMullin who played a floating shot straight onto the end of #12 Kieran Brown's stick to tip past #36 Brett Shepherd.

#19 Innes Gallacher fired a shot from the right as he looked to double the Knights' advantage early, but it was met by the chest of Shepherd with the rebound cleared by #75 Brendan Baird before a yellow shirt could pounce upon the chance.



At 8:14, #23 Dominik Gabaj equalised for the visitors, but the Knights were looking to quickly reinstate their lead as they were back on the attack through #91 Jake Witkowski who was denied by the side netting at 8:52 followed by #36 Brett Shepherd making a block at the back door to prevent another dangerous attack from the hosts. #12 Kieran Brown retrieved the puck and fired another attempt towards #36 Brett Shepherd, testing the Bees goalie as he tried to slip it past him at the near post.

The Knights were then sent on the powerplay as #75 Brendan Baird received two-minutes for hooking at 9:34, but it was the Bees who would have the first chance threatening chance of the two-minutes as they broke forwards shorthanded with Gospel producing the save.

Controlling possession of the puck, the home side carefully worked the puck back into the offensive zone, bringing it around the net before laying it off to #9 Jordan Buesa who was in the perfect position on the right of the ice, having just come off the bench, to unleash a slapshot that went just wide of the goal.

The Bees were then breaking forwards again as the Knights struggled to look like a team with a player advantage, but much to the delight of Leeds fans, #31 Sam Gospel was out to retrieve the puck and clear the danger with chants of "nice one Sammy" echoing around The Castle.

#9 Jordan Buesa went close again, but this time his shot was high of #36 Brett Shepherd. They began to look more dangerous in the offensive zone, but a two-minute minor awarded to #3 Bailey Perre for tripping at 12:25 unsettled this dominance slightly as the Bees looked to attack, trying to feed the puck in at the back door, but Gospel made the block and collected the puck.

The visitors dominated possession whilst the Knights were on the penalty kill but couldn't find a way through the league leaders' stoic defence. Returning to full strength unscathed, #19 Innes Gallacher tried to create an opportunity to regain the lead for his side as he pulled the puck back into the slot for #33 Finn Bradon, but the pass had just too much on it and the Billingham-born forward couldn't reach it: this didn't stop him though as he fought to win possession back, his following chance unable to find the back of the net either.

The period ended with #41 Oli Endicott receiving a two-minute penalty for interference with the score level and an important 40-minutes to come.



Second period (4-1)

Starting on the penalty kill, the Knights began the second period at a steady pace, waiting patiently for their chance to attack, and it took less than three minutes of the restart for #9 Jordan Buesa to fire the puck past #36 Brett Shepherd. #91 Jake Witkowski played the puck across the slot to the Scottish forward who slotted it home at the back door and made it 2-1 to the Knights with the second assist going to #14 Lewis Baldwin for his second of the night.

The lead was doubled by #19 Innes Gallacher at 23:59 as he broke into the offensive zone with #37 Matt Barron and they went two-on-one with the 19-year-old sending it into the net under the arm of #36 Brett Shepherd from close range.

#6 Ethan Hehir kept up the Knights' quick start to the period with a close chance to make it four at 24:36 - after receiving the puck, he weaved through the Bees' defencemen and was forced to send the puck to his right as he was unable to get a shot off.

A penalty to the visitors at 24:39 saw #27 Josh Smith sit two-minutes for slashing and sent the Knights on another powerplay. #54 Noah McMullin floated a shot in from the blue line with #11 Matt Haywood looking to tap it beyond #36 Brett Shepherd, but the goalie made the block with the rebound not quite falling to #37 Matt Barron. #9 Jordan Buesa had another slapshot blocked and the Bees were back to full strength.

With ten minutes of the period to play, #12 Kieran Brown combined with #9 Jordan Buesa to create a play that looked close to the Knights scoring their fourth - the captain tried to play a pinpoint pass across the slot to the approaching #9 Jordan Buesa and was troubled by the stick of #74 Liam Morris and the marking of #73 Edward Bradley whilst doing so, and whilst the puck managed to make its way into a dangerous area still, the Scottish forward could not control it enough to produce a testing shot and the danger was cleared by the visitors.

#54 Noah McMullin saw his shot go wide at 29:30 before #31 Sam Gospel was being called upon at the other end as the Bees searched to reduce the deficit, but the Leeds goalie made the save and then it wasn't long before they were on yet another powerplay: #21 Marcel Balaz received two-minutes for tripping at 31:51 and the Knights were once again with the player advantage.

Despite being on the penalty kill, the Bees put Leeds under pressure in their own zone, but #95 Mac Howlett attempted to reduce the pressure as he took the puck up the other end, his shot through traffic unfortunately missing the intended target of the back of the net.

The visitors returned to full strength after a successful penalty kill and the Knights seemed to find their groove once more with #91 Jake Witkowski forcing a glove save from #36 Brett Shepherd with a shot from the left at 33:06 followed by #44 Jordan Griffin seeing himself with a chance at 33:52, but his effort was fired at the Bees netminder.

With the physicality of the game ever-increasing with hits left, right and centre, it was inevitable that another penalty would soon be awarded, and it was to #9 Vanya Antonov at 36:35 as he sat two-minutes for high sticks. #12 Kieran Brown then shot from distance whilst #33 Finn Bradon missed the perfect chance to extend the lead further with an open goal available for him to shoot into, but the 18-year-old sent the puck high.



#9 Jordan Buesa was denied by the post, but just as the visitors returned to full strength, he scored the Knights' fourth - #54 Noah McMullin was the man with the floating pass again, tipped in this time by #9 Jordan Buesa for his 50th league point of the season.

That brought an action-packed second period in which the Knights dominated to an end with a three-goal lead heading into the final 20 minutes courtesy of a goal from #19 Innes Gallacher and a #9 Jordan Buesa brace.

Third period (6-3)

An early penalty for the Bees at 41:55 sent them on the penalty kill with #75 Brendan Baird in the box for slashing, but they still had a chance to trouble the Knights as #31 Sam Gospel was forced to make a breakaway save to deny them a potential route back into the game.

As the Knights increased the tempo again with their trophy now only minutes away, #37 Matt Barron tried to make it five, but his chance went wide before #95 Mac Howlett's effort was caught by the glove of Shepherd.

A penalty against #54 Noah McMullin for slashing at 44:45 sent the Knights on the penalty kill and the Bees utilised their player advantage: a pass through the middle from #23 Dominik Gabaj found #29 Gianni Vitali who scored the one-timer at 45:58 with the second assist awarded to #21 Marcel Balaz.

The hosts were back to attacking when #91 Jake Witkowski fired a shot towards #36 Brett Shepherd, but the goalie's pads denied the puck entrance to the net and no Knights player was there to capitalise upon the rebound. Leeds continued to drive the puck forwards with #11 Matt Haywood working hard down the right-hand side not to lose possession before pulling the puck back to his captain, #12 Kieran Brown, who was denied by the post.



#19 Innes Gallacher was the next player to battle for the puck on the right and he successfully won possession, playing it to #33 Finn Bradon who forced #36 Brett Shepherd to make a high glove save to deny him.

At 51:08, #9 Jordan Buesa received two-minutes for tripping, but #37 Matt Barron took matters into his own hands scoring short-handed on the breakaway to make it three goals in two nights for the Canadian-import as the Knights' three-goal lead was reinstated at 52:20.

Less than a minute later, #12 Kieran Brown fired the puck past #36 Brett Shepherd just as his side returned to full strength, assisted by #54 Noah McMullin for his third of the night, and #11 Matt Haywood for his second of the night.

#31 Sam Gospel made some important saves as the game entered the final five minutes with the Bees applying the pressure in the Knights' defensive zone. It was a scramble in front of the Leeds netminder at 55:13, but he stood strong and denied them until 57:28 when they managed to reduce the deficit to three through #73 Edward Bradley, assisted by #9 Vanya Antonov and #29 Gianni Vitali.

The final two-minutes saw Knights fans inside The Castle sit eagerly on the edge of their seats waiting to watch their team be crowned league champions for a second successive season.



It was a second league title for Leeds Knights head coach Ryan Aldridge who commented after the game: *"I said this last year: it's very hard to win, especially this year, it's a hard league. The boys have been tough at times, but they've always found a way to win. Tonight was no different. I thought the first period we weren't good, but they had a pretty direct talking to and they had a response, and it was unbelievable. They deserved to win the game tonight [...] "It's hard to win and they've done it two years in a row, so it shows the character of the youngest group in the league."*

The Knights have had only six regulation losses all season and have comfortably conceded the least number of goals. They look to finish the season as the second highest scorers with a Yorkshire derby double header against the Sheffield Steeldogs coming up at the weekend, followed by a final regular season game at The Castle against the Solway Sharks and then a trip to Hull to face the Seahawks.

The 2023/24 Planet Ice NIHL National Division Champions are the Leeds Knights.

Match report written by Emily Laycock

Photos taken by Jacob Lowe

The squad that won the trophy: #31 Sam Gospel, #32 Harrison Walker, #35 Luca Tessadri; #3 Bailey Perre, #8 Bow Neely, #14 Lewis Baldwin, #24 Dylan Hehir, #26 Tommy Spraggon, #44 Jordan Griffin, #54 Noah McMullin, #81 Louis Colvin; #2 James Archer, #6 Ethan Hehir, #9 Jordan Buesa, #11 Matt Haywood, #12 Kieran Brown, #19 Innes Gallacher, #33 Finn Bradon, #32 Gregor Mills, #37 Matt Barron, #41 Oli Endicott, #91 Jake Witkowski, #95 Mac Howlett