Leeds Knights 6-3 Sheffield Steeldogs: League champions victorious in Yorkshire derby (24th March 2024)

The Morley Glass Leeds Knights hosted the second game of the Yorkshire derby double header at The Castle on Sunday evening - their first game on home ice as the league champions. The previous night, #32 Harrison Walker led the Knights to a 5-4 victory in Sheffield with goals from #37 Matt Barron, #91 Jake Witkowski, #11 Matt Haywood and #12 Kieran Brown.

Having already secured the league title, the focus of Ryan Aldridge's side has now turned to the playoffs.

The remaining fixtures of the regular season are an opportunity for certain players to be rested, for others to nurse to injuries, and for some to trial new tactics.

The 6-3 win in LS11 on Sunday saw the Knights achieve their sixth victory in six games over the Steeldogs this season, continuing the momentum of their second successive league title into the playoff fixtures that will hopefully lead them to Coventry with only one loss in the past 15 games.

First period (3-0)
The return of #19 Innes Gallacher was the only change to the Knights' line-up ahead of the Yorkshire derby as they iced with a squad of 19+2 with #31 Sam Gospel retaking his position in between the pipes. The visitors lined up with a young squad of 15+2 with the notable absences of key players such as Jonathan Phillips, Cam Brownley and Jason Hewitt - #34 Dimitri Zimozdra started in net.

The Knights immediately took control of the game with a loose puck in the slot almost met by #19 Innes Gallacher, but his effort was blocked by the pads of #34 Dimitri Zimozdra. Further chances from #33 Finn Bradon and #19 Innes Gallacher, followed by a #11 Matt Haywood shot from the left, saw the Knights dominate possession of the puck in an almost carbon copy of the first period the previous night in Sheffield.

#95 Mac Howlett scored the opening goal of the night at 5:22, tapping it home into an empty net after #37 Matt Barron pulled the goalie out of position on the right and laid the puck to the 24-year-old who was in the perfect position to open the scoring. The second assist went to #81 Louis Colvin and the Knights took the lead in the Yorkshire derby.

Continuous offensive pressure led to #8 Bow Neely thundering down the left with the defenceman trying to guide the puck beyond Zimozdra at the near post, but his effort was blocked and he was forced to take the puck around the net instead, laying it to #91 Jake Witkowski who passed to #12 Kieran Brown in front of the goalie - his shot was deflected wide off #34 Dimitri Zimozdra's pads.

The Steeldogs broke at 8:07, but Gospel quickly denied them and a quick line change for the Knights saw them instantly back on the attack with #54 Noah McMullin directing a shot towards net that deflected off a skate in the slot and into the path of #11 Matt Haywood to capitalise upon. The second assist went to the captain with the goal timed at 8:46.

The Endicott – Bradon – Gallacher line continued to put Sheffield's defence under pressure with their high intensity and energy as the first period neared the halfway point. #33 Finn Bradon couldn't get control of the puck in front of #34 Dimitri Zimozdra with the chance cleared whilst #19 Innes Gallacher saw his shot denied by the goalie's chest at 10:58.

Chances kept coming for the Knights with a rebounded puck off Zimozdra's pads not quite falling to #12 Kieran Brown to fire home and #95 Mac Howlett's effort hitting the post - it looked inevitable that the league champions would extend their lead and it wasn't long before two became three as a face-off in the Steeldogs' defensive zone led to #91 Jake Witkowski getting himself on the scoresheet for a second night running. #11 Matt Haywood won the face-off before passing the puck to #12 Kieran Brown who played it back to Witkowski – the American import shot from distance to extend the Knights' advantage at 16:37.

With two minutes of the period remaining, #19 Innes Gallacher pulled the puck back to #41 Oli Endicott from behind the net, setting the forward up right in front of goal, but he couldn't get the puck past Zimozdra. Gallacher then found himself with the puck at the back door, but the Steeldogs' netminder stood tall to deny the Knights and keep the score at 3-0 as the clock ran down.
Coinciding penalties for #3 Bailey Perre and #56 Lee Haywood for roughing ended the first period with the home side taking a three-goal lead into the following 40 minutes.

Second period (4-3)
Starting the second period as they had the first, Leeds' attacking outlets were out in full force, dominating possession of the puck, particularly in their offensive zone. #9 Jordan Buesa and #95 Mac Howlett tried to play a one-two before #37 Matt Barron was forcing #34 Dimitri Zimozdra to make a double pad block as the league winners looked for an early goal at 22:06.

#19 Innes Gallacher worked his way down the right at 22:47, but his shot was denied by Zimozdra with #41 Oli Endicott unable to collect the rebound and #54 Noah McMullin's shot wide of the net.

A two-minute penalty against #33 Finn Bradon for slashing at 23:42 sent the Steeldogs on the powerplay with a hooking penalty against #12 Kieran Brown at 24:36 making it five-on-three in favour of the visitors. This player advantage started a promising 15-minutes for Stevie Weeks' side as #4 Lewis Bell sent a slapshot from the point through traffic and past #31 Sam Gospel, assisted by #13 Vladislaus Vulkanovs at 24:53.

The Knights returned to full strength but couldn't reinstate their three-goal lead as the Steeldogs battled for possession. #12 Kieran Brown was dispossessed in the neutral zone around 30-minutes with Sheffield taking full advantage of the opportunity, testing Gospel with a shot that forced a high glove save to be made.

A penalty against #90 Jonathan Kirk for tripping at 30:48 sent the Knights on the powerplay with a well-worked play at 31:40 seeing the home side denied a back door tap in and #34 Dimitri Zimozdra received a two-minute minor for delay of game as he kicked the net off in the process. The game was to be played five-on-three, this time in Leeds' favour, and #12 Kieran Brown took the opportunity to make it four with a powerplay goal glove side at 32:16, assisted by #95 Mac Howlett and #37 Matt Barron.

Typical of a Yorkshire derby, the penalties kept coming with #8 Bow Neely next sent to the box with a two-minute minor for slashing at 32:44 - it was four-on-four for 56 seconds.

#33 Finn Bradon was the next Knight in the box receiving a two-minute minor for tripping at 36:23 and the visitors scored another powerplay goal, this time courtesy of #56 Lee Haywood who fired it past Gospel from the point, through traffic again, assisted by #4 Lewis Bell and #71 Jack Brammer.

With 15 seconds left of the period, Sheffield reduced the deficit further with a well-worked move from #13 Vladislaus Vulkanovs and #56 Lee Haywood making the score 4-3 heading into the second intermission.

Third period (6-3)
#95 Mac Howlett brought back the Knights' intensity from the opening 20-minutes with an early shot at 41:39 before #44 Jordan Griffin was shooting through traffic, but nobody was there to collect the rebound of his shot.

By the sixth minute of the period, #11 Matt Haywood was securing his brace: receiving the puck behind the net, the former Glasgow player passed it out to his right to #91 Jake Witkowski who tracked his movement and delivered it back to him for Haywood to rifle into the roof of the net at the back door.

The chances were coming thick and fast for the home side with #95 Mac Howlett weaving into the slot from the right and shooting low, but his effort was blocked by #34 Dimitri Zimozdra's pads. #19 Innes Gallacher went

close to adding his name to the scoresheet with the offensive pressure not faltering as he then pulled the puck back and set #41 Oli Endicott up with a chance, but they couldn't make it six just yet.

A penalty against #4 Lewis Bell at 48:17 for slashing sent the Knights on the powerplay, but the visitors denied them another goal despite #12 Kieran Brown and #41 Oli Endicott going close. The Steeldogs applied the pressure even whilst shorthanded with #31 Sam Gospel called upon to make saves and limit Sheffield to just three on the night.

Having returned to full strength unscathed, the Steeldogs broke with one of their forwards seemingly through on goal, but #8 Bow Neely got back and defended well with the puck then immediately back in the league champions' possession.

#44 Jordan Griffin was sent to the box with a two-minute minor for hooking at 55:35, but the Knights did what they do best and scored a shorthanded goal despite being a player short. #91 Jake Witkowski doubled his tally on the night as he dispossessed the Steeldogs' defenceman before firing home unassisted as 57:02.

It was another four-point weekend for Leeds Knights with a Yorkshire derby win at The Castle to round off the penultimate weekend of regular season fixtures. #11 Matt Haywood was the Thermos Sponsored MVP. The Knights host Solway Sharks on Friday night for their last home game of the season before travelling to Hull on Sunday for another Yorkshire derby – and then the journey to Coventry begins…

Match report written by Emily Laycock
Photos taken by Jacob Lowe