

Leeds Knights 6-3 Solway Sharks: Final regular season game at The Castle (29th March 2024)



It was the last dance of the regular season at The Castle on Friday evening, made even more special by a touching retirement tribute to James Archer prior to the opening face-off. Having been a part of 12 teams, played in 1020 games and competed in 19 seasons, Archer is hanging up his skates with 419 goals scored and 454 assists recorded.

The Morley Glass Leeds Knights welcomed Solway Sharks to LS11, and Ryan Aldridge's side ended their 23/24 season on home ice with a win. At the end of their first

season in the NIHL National League, Solway Sharks have missed out on a playoff spot, but they travelled to Leeds looking to close off their season on a high whilst the Knights were seeking momentum and confidence for their upcoming playoff encounters that begin next weekend with a Yorkshire derby double header against the Hull Seahawks.

Last time round

When the Sharks were last at The Castle, it was a boxing day victory for the Knights. Despite #71 Craig Peacock giving the visitors an early lead, #12 Kieran Brown started Leeds' comeback with a goal that saw him reach the 50-point mark for the season, assisted by #54 Noah McMullin and #37 Matt Barron. #9 Jordan Buesa scored the second before #37 Matt Barron rounded the second period off with a powerplay goal that would become the last of the game.

First period (2-2)

The Knights lined up with a squad of 19+2 including #33 Finn Bradon who recently extended his contract to keep him in Leeds for another two seasons. In his first season full-time with the Knights, the Darlington-born forward has scored 21 points in 51 league and cup games this season and has featured predominantly on the first line alongside captain Kieran Brown and Canadian-import Matt Barron. The Sharks travelled with a squad of 18+2 opting for #30 Calum Hepburn in between the pipes with #31 Sam Gospel in net at the other end for the hosts.



As could be expected from league champions, Leeds were offensive immediately from face-off with #33 Finn Bradon and #19 Innes Gallacher combining: Bradon played the puck across the face of goal to the approaching Gallacher, but it just slipped under the 19-year-old's stick in front of the open net with Hepburn pulled to the left to prevent Bradon, should he have shot.

Not allowing the Knights time to get comfortable in their offensive zone, the Sharks worked the puck towards Gospel with a shot at 2:18 forcing the netminder to stretch across his goal to make the block at the bottom left, keeping the score level.

#34 Gregor Mills found himself with a chance with three-minutes played, but he couldn't poke it beyond #30 Calum Hepburn and the puck was back into the visitors' possession. It was a closely contested opening five minutes at The Castle with both sides battling for the puck and both creating chances - the Knights looked the more dominant of the two sides, but they were unsuccessful in converting their chances into goals. At four-minutes, #12 Kieran Brown saw his effort caught by Hepburn followed by #8 Bow Neely thundering forwards with the crowd urging him to shoot, but the scoring still wasn't opened.



At 4:45, #43 Nolan Gardiner received two-minutes for tripping sending the Knights on the first powerplay of the evening and #12 Kieran Brown took advantage straight away, firing a shot towards the top left corner with the puck taking a deflection off a Solway stick before hitting the post and seemingly crossing the line before bouncing back out of the net. The official nearest the net awarded the goal at 5:45, but after discussions, the decision was no goal - this just gave Leeds even more motivation to get themselves on the scoresheet first with controlled passing in the

offensive zone eventually leading to #54 Noah McMullin firing home from distance, making it 1-0 at 6:19. #11 Matt Haywood and #12 Kieran Brown began the move in the right corner before pulling the puck back to the Canadian import who scored the powerplay goal with no questions asked as to whether it stood or not.

Leeds were dominating with the puck constantly passed around Solway's defensive zone and their defencemen working tirelessly to prevent another early goal being conceded. Even when Solway found themselves with the puck, the Knights dispossessed them before they could create a chance and get a shot away. #95 Mac Howlett played a pinpoint pass from the left into the centre of the slot to #33 Matt Barron, under the falling body of #12 Kell Beattie, and the import met the puck, but with the tiniest of spaces to slip it past #30 Calum Hepburn, he just mistimed his shot and the chance went past the net.

The Sharks then broke forwards and scored two goals in quick succession to bring the score level at 11:15, and then take the lead by 12:56. #14 Lewis Young started with a shot past #31 Sam Gospel at the back post, assisted by #71 Craig Peacock before the 35-year-old grabbed a goal of his own, going it alone before firing into the far top corner. The Sharks' pressure continued as Gospel was then forced to deflect the puck away from his net with his stick.

Regaining possession and looking for an equaliser, Leeds worked the puck back into their offensive zone with #11 Matt Haywood trying his luck, but the puck hit the plexi glass. Solway defenceman, #53 Kian Shevlin sat two-minutes for slashing at 15:41 and the Knights were on the powerplay, but the visitors didn't settle down their attacking intent as they took the puck and tried to break shorthanded.

Looking more like the side on the powerplay, #11 Matt Haywood received the puck and was so close to tapping it in and the back door, but his shot rebounded and fell into the path of the captain whose shot was denied entrance into the goal by #30 Calum Hepburn at 16:44. Still pushing, #91 Jake Witkowski shot from the left with #19 Innes Gallacher going to try and collect the rebound but Hepburn covered the puck with his glove and brought a momentary pause to the game. #54 Noah McMullin was the next to go close with his shot through traffic from distance causing the Sharks' netminder to make a pad block before he was called upon to save another Witkowski shot from the left.

#19 Innes Gallacher was fighting to get into a scoring position, but the Sharks were on to his attacking prowess, essentially marking him out of the powerplay and it wasn't until the visitors returned to full strength that Leeds could score the equaliser. #11 Matt Haywood was found with the puck at the back door with his shot at #30 Calum Hepburn rebounding across the crease to #12 Kieran Brown who was waiting to get the final touch at the back door, guiding it into the net with the second assist going to #91 Jake Witkowski and the goal timed at 17:50.

Solway hadn't returned to full strength for long before they were a player down again as #43 Nolan Gardiner received a two-minute minor for elbowing at 18:40 meaning they would have to see the period out with four skaters. The Knights didn't have chance to utilise their player advantage before #41 Oli Endicott was sent to the penalty box for hooking with the period coming to an end 2-2.

Second period (2-2)

A lacklustre second period saw the Knights create chances that could have seen them reinstate their lead, but the visitors remained strong in their defence.

Just under three-minutes in, #95 Mac Howlett weaved through Solway's defensive partnership, firing a shot at #30 Calum Hepburn from close range, but the goalie's pads prevented him from scoring with the rebound falling perfectly to #9 Jordan Buesa who was coming at too much speed to direct it the right way - the puck slipped to the left of the net and back into the Sharks' possession.

Haywood, Brown and Witkowski tried to create a threatening chance at 26:20, but neither of them could direct the puck past Hepburn who stood tall. #44 Jordan Griffin was the next Knight to go close forcing yet another save from the 27-year-old before Gospel was making a save of his own at the other end when Solway broke at 27:46.



Back with the puck, the league champions were heading towards Hepburn once again, this time through #33 Finn Bradon who skated past the net at speed before looking up and spotting #19

Innes Gallacher – he pulled the puck back into the slot for him and the Scottish-born forward fired the puck with power towards the top right corner of the goal, but #30 Calum Hepburn got a shoulder to it and Gallacher couldn't capitalise upon the rebound.

In his final league game at The Castle sporting a Knights shirt, #2 James Archer took a shot, but it deflected high and the Sharks were then on the attack, applying pressure in their offensive zone and testing the defence of Aldridge's side. #91 Jake Witkowski didn't allow them to enjoy possession of the puck for long though as he intercepted a pass, breaking forwards and having a huge chance to score denied by Hepburn once more.

At 34:41, #2 James Archer was sent to the box, receiving two-minutes for slashing sending the visitors on the powerplay. The Knight defended well and returned to full strength unscathed, only to be sent on the penalty kill again at 38:02 at #33 Finn Bradon received two-minutes for high sticks. A competitive period of tough defending and brilliant saves ended as the first period had, 2-2.

Third period (6-3)

A very different third period of hockey graced The Castle with #11 Matt Haywood getting things going early as he scored the go-ahead goal, unassisted at 41:00. Solway reacted quickly, and the score was level again only

47 seconds later through #53 Kian Shelvin who fired the puck past Gospel immediately from a face-off in their offensive zone - his first professional goal.

A penalty against the Solway Sharks saw #5 Olivier Arsenau sit two-minutes for holding at 43:21 and the Knights were on the powerplay. #91 Jake Witkowski went close with a shot from the left again before #19 Innes Gallacher tried to set up #11 Matt Haywood at 43:56 who fired at #30 Calum Hepburn's chest. An initial play from #8 Bow Neely from the point led to #37 Matt Barron tapping home the puck from in front, assisted by #41 Oli Endicott and #95 Mac Howlett to give the Knights the lead at 44:49.

Coinciding penalties for #2 James Archer for Leeds and #5 Olivier Arsenau for Solway, both for fighting, were given at 45:49 with Archer receiving a further two minutes for cross-checking sending the Sharks on the powerplay. However, the next goal of the game would go in favour of the Knights with #91 Jake Witkowski scoring the fifth Leeds goal of the night at 48:38. The assist from #12 Kieran Brown saw him collect his 120th point of the season with the second assist went to #11 Matt Haywood.



The battle continued with Leeds dominating possession and creating the more dangerous chances of the two sides. A roughing penalty against #12 Kell Beattie at 54:10 led to #51 Struan Tonnar receiving a ten-minute penalty for misconduct and the Sharks were back on the penalty kill as the game was played five-on-four. The Knights couldn't capitalise upon their player advantage despite #9 Jordan Buesa having a double chance and #8 Bow Neely shooting through traffic, his effort going wide.

The Sharks returned to full strength with a timeout called at 58:11 and #30 Calum Hepburn pulled in favour of an extra skater. #95 Mac Howlett wasted no time in scoring an empty net goal, slipping the puck into the vacated goal at 58:20 unassisted to make it 6-3.



A roughing penalty was given to #2 James Archer at 59:41 with the Knights then calling a timeout of their own. The clock ran down the remaining 20 seconds and the buzzer sounded with another Leeds victory at The Castle.

The Leeds Knights travel to Hull on Easter Sunday for the final regular season game before a double header against their Yorkshire rivals begins on home ice next Friday as the journey to Coventry begins.

*Match report written by Emily Laycock
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