

Bristol Pitbulls 4-7 Leeds Knights: A hard-fought two points on the road for the Knights (20th January 2024)

The Morley Glass Leeds Knights were in action again on Saturday evening as they headed south to take on bottom of the table, Bristol Pitbulls, at The Pound.

A 5-1 victory over Telford Tigers the night before at The Castle sent the Knights on their travels full of confidence as they sought the two points to extend their lead further at the top of the table, whilst the Pitbulls were coming into the game off the back of a 7-6 overtime defeat to Solway Sharks.

Last time round

The Knights hosted the Pitbulls last Sunday in a physical encounter that saw them victorious at The Castle with a 7-5 win. #19 Innes Gallacher scored his first goal at The Castle with #91 Jake Witkowski recording an assist on his second home debut, alongside goals from #54 Noah McMullin, #9 Jordan Buesa, and a brace each for #11 Matt Haywood, and #12 Kieran Brown.

First period (3-1)

The Knights lined up with a squad of 16+2, as did the Pitbulls who opted for #21 Ben Norton between the pipes. The starting line-up for the Knights consisted of #31 Sam Gospel, #54 Noah McMullin, #14 Lewis Baldwin, #11 Matt Haywood, #95 Mac Howlett and #91 Jake Witkowski.

The opening minutes were end to end with both sides seeing plenty of the puck, before Leeds were sent on an early powerplay at 2:20 after #73 Sam Smith received a two-minute penalty. #95 Mac Howlett saw his shot on the short wide go just wide of the net before #54 Noah McMullin lined up a shot with the initial save from Norton rebounding, but there was nobody there to capitalise upon the opportunity. The Canadian defenceman tried again, this time a short sided effort, but the Pitbulls cleared the danger and killed the penalty successfully at 4:20.

#95 Mac Howlett was dispossessed by the Pitbulls as they returned to full strength, breaking forward with #91 Mason Lipsey taking a shot that spiralled to the left of Gospel.

#41 Oli Endicott then sat two+two for roughing at 6:17 with #93 Tanner Butler also sitting two-minutes for roughing as the game was to be played four-on-four.

#12 Kieran Brown shot across Norton, forcing a glove save, before firing another shot in the netminder's direction at 12:46, forcing yet another save. At the other end of the ice, #44 Jordan Griffin used his body well to stop the Pitbulls from having puck possession in the offensive zone.

As Bristol returned to full strength and went on the powerplay for two-minutes, a deflected shot from the hosts was saved by Gospel. At 8:55, #93 Tanner Butler opened the scoring with a slapshot fired past Gospel on the powerplay, assisted by #91 Mason Lipsey.

#9 Jordan Buesa tried his luck at a shorthanded goal at 10:44 before the Knights returned to full strength, immediately followed by Buesa and Cochrane receiving two-minute penalties for roughing that cancelled each other out with the game still five-on-five.

Butler shot again, almost a replica of his first goal, before Smith forced a glove save from Gospel, the Knights netminder being the busier of the two in the opening ten minutes.

The Knights regained possession of the puck as they searched for the equaliser but #95 Mac Howlett couldn't get his shot away in the offensive zone. Buesa's shot was met by the chest of Norton with the rebound uncollected, with Baldwin's shot going wide at 11:55 as the visitors fought to bring the game level.

A hooking penalty for #34 Gregor Mills timed at 12:04 sent the Pitbulls on another powerplay, and it was another powerplay goal at 12:24 that saw them extend their lead to two. A pass across the slot was met by #25 Max Birbraer who fired the puck into the back of the net at the back door.

The Knights returned to full strength at 15:38 but were quickly caught again by the hosts who were hungry for more goals. #11 Sean Morris collected the pass from #25 Max Birbraer before shooting past Gospel to extend the lead at The Pound to three.

Gospel found the puck in the back of his net again at 16:48 but the officials quickly disallowed the goal after the bouncing puck in the crease looked to be pushed over the line by a glove.

A powerplay opportunity was presented to the Knights at 15:58 with #25 Max Birbraer sitting two-minutes for hooking. Kieran Brown tried to capitalise upon the player advantage, but his shot was blocked and the rebound was cleared. #11 Matt Haywood's shot was saved shortly after with the Knights increasing the intensity as they sought to claw a goal back, and the hard work paid off at 18:32 when #91 Jake Witkowski's shot hit the backbar, crossing the line to ensure the Knights didn't finish the period goalless.

With a minute of the first period remaining, the Pitbulls returned to full strength and the Knights ferociously tried to reduce the deficit further with Howlett shooting and forcing Norton to use his stick to direct it to the corner, followed by a flurry of shots from Brown that closed out the period 3-1 in the hosts favour.

Second period (3-4)

It was a positive start to the second period for the Knights as they dominated possession and tested the Pitbulls' defensive line. The visitors were working the puck well through the zones and putting the hosts under pressure behind their net with #44 Jordan Griffin taking a shot through traffic before the puck ricocheted at the back door presenting an opportunity for #41 Oli Endicott that he was unable to claim before Norton retrieved the puck.

By 23:15, it had all been one way traffic with consecutive positive shifts from the Knights, but #21 Ben Norton did well to make incredible saves to deny the Leeds forwards.

#41 Oli Endicott broke forward alone at 26:02, picking up the puck in the neutral zone and firing it past Norton from above the face-off circles, assisted by #6 Ethan Hehir and #33 Finn Bradon.

As the hosts then broke away, Gospel's lightning-fast reactions helped him to make an incredible save at 27:03 after the initial stop deflected off his shoulder, falling back into the Pitbulls' possession and the follow-up shot forcing a high glove save.

A period of good passing from Leeds allowed Buesa to force a glove save from Norton before #33 Finn Bradon broke forward at 29:00, passing the puck to #41 Oli Endicott across the face of goal with the British forward unable to get a shot off.

Knights captain, #12 Kieran Brown, fired the puck up high out of Norton's reach with a goal at the back door bringing the visitors back on level terms at 30:59, assisted by #37 Matt Barron and #8 Bow Neely.

The final five minutes of the period were dominated by the Knights as the Hehir-Bradon-Endicott line worked well to open up Bristol's defence.

#73 Smith received a two-minute penalty for holding at 38:36 sending the Knights on the powerplay. #12 Kieran Brown scored his brace with his shot flying past Norton at 39:18 from the slot.

The Pitbulls returned to full strength but were quickly sent on another penalty kill as #93 Tanner Butler sat two minutes for roughing bringing the second period to a close with the Knights holding a one-goal advantage.

Third period (4-7)

It was the Knights with the player advantage as the third period began, but the Pitbulls emerged from the penalty kill unscathed, despite pressure from the visitors.

Morris came close to equalising for the hosts as he forced Gospel into action with Bristol looking to have increased the tempo from the second period where they couldn't squeeze the puck into the Knights' net.

#41 Oli Endicott sat two minutes for delay of game at 45:24 but Bristol couldn't utilise the powerplay to their advantage as Leeds looked to have the more dangerous chances across the two minutes - the Knights lead the league with the number of shorthanded goals scored with a total of 14. #95 Mac Howlett came close to scoring with a shot at 45:31, followed by another shot from a tight angle as Leeds successfully killed the penalty and returned to five skaters.

The fifth goal for the Knights came at 48:34 when #37 Matt Barron weaved through the Bristol skaters before playing a backhanded pass to #8 Bow Neely who fired the shot out of Norton's reach.

#11 Matt Haywood received a two-minute penalty for hooking at 50:52 sending the Pitbulls on the powerplay, but they couldn't reduce the deficit despite the player advantage. Howlett put the hosts under pressure whilst Buesa darted forwards looking for a shorthanded goal.

Almost instantly after returning to full strength, #12 Kieran Brown completed his hat-trick, scooping the puck into the net to score the Knights' sixth of the evening.

Leeds were quickly back on the penalty kill as #14 Lewis Baldwin sat two-minutes for holding at 54:09 with #33 Finn Bradon then receiving two-minutes for roughing at 54:51 alongside Harding sitting two-minutes for the Pitbulls.

On the powerplay, the Pitbulls got one back through #93 Tanner Butler shooting through traffic at 55:27 with Gospel unable to see through the screen and prevent the goal.

With 56 seconds left to play, Bristol called a timeout. Ben Norton left his net empty at 59:25 in favour of an extra Bristol skater. #54 Noah McMullin was not missing the opportunity of the empty net, picking the puck up in his own zone before skating to the red line and firing home at 59:55, bringing the final score to 4-7.

Man of the match was presented to #12 Kieran Brown for the Knights, and #93 Tanner Butler for the hosts.

It was a challenging game on the road that required great character from the Knights to fight back from being 3-1 down at the break, but goals from #91 Jake Witkowski, #41 Oli Endicott, #8 Bow Neely, and a hat-trick from the captain, #12 Kieran Brown, secured the two-points making it a four-point weekend for the league leaders.

Match report written by Emily Laycock