

Leeds Knights 8-3 Hull Seahawks: The playoffs are underway (5th April 2024)



The journey to Coventry began in LS11 on Friday evening as the Morley Glass Leeds Knights welcomed the Hull Reckitt Seahawks to The Castle as playoff hockey got underway. The Yorkshire rivals have had eight competitive meetings this year with four wins apiece, the most recent falling in favour of the Seahawks as the last game of the regular league season was played last weekend on Easter Sunday.

However, the Knights took the win this time and got their playoff campaign off to the best possible. With the new group format for playoffs this year, the loss to the league champions has not demolished Hull's hopes of reaching the final four with five games still to play, the next coming on Sunday when they host the Knights.

First period (2-1)

#34 Gregor Mills was the only absentee for Leeds Knights as they lined up with a squad of 18+2 led out by #31 Sam Gospel. In between the pipes for Hull Seahawks, #72 Jordan McLaughlin took his usual position as the visitors iced with a squad at full strength of 17+2.

The frantic start was resemblant of a derby with the puck fluttering in and out of the Knights' possession as both sides battled to get the upper hand from the off, but it took only 1:29 for the deadlock to be broken as Seahawks captain #16 Sam Towner drove down the right, firing a shot towards #31 Sam Gospel with the puck just slipping past the netminder at the near post. The goal was assisted by #11 Finlay Ulrick and #15 Jamie Chilcott.

#91 Jake Witkowski wasted no time in responding to the goal conceded as he found space in centre ice before playing a pass to the left where #11 Matt Haywood was waiting to fire home past McLaughlin who had been drawn to the right side of his net to prevent the American import from slipping one past him. The goal was timed at 2:38 with the second assist awarded to the captain #12 Kieran Brown.

The Knights were close to a second just moments later as a shot fired towards #72 Jordan McLaughlin was millimetres away from crossing the line, but the officials indicated no goal, and the hosts were made to wait until 4:09 to celebrate again. Given time and space to work his way into a shooting position from below the goal-line and into the left circle, #6 Ethan Hehir unleashed a shot into the top right-hand corner of the Seahawks' net to give the Knights the lead for the first time in the game, assisted by #19 Innes Gallacher and #2 James Archer.

#95 Mac Howlett tried to make his mark on the game early on as he started a move on the left of the net before making his way to the post from behind and trying to fire the puck into the far corner across #72 Jordan McLaughlin, but his effort went just wide.

Leeds continued the intensity, battling for the puck and pressuring the Seahawks in their own zone; that was until a Hull player went down in his own zone which created a short break in play and a chance for the visitors to recollect after giving up a one-goal lead.

The Seahawks came back stronger from the restart as they worked the puck towards Gospel, forcing the netminder to make a pad block followed by #94 Declan Balmer shooting from distance in an attempt to score the equaliser, but his effort went high, barrelling into the plexi glass at 8:10. The Knights weren't allowing their rivals time on the puck to make offensive decisions as they continuously pressured them in the neutral zone, but when #44 Jordan Griffin slipped, the Seahawks found a way through the solid defence of the league champions with #31 Sam Gospel producing an important save to deny #21 Bobby Chamberlain and keep the score at 2-1.

Another chance in favour of the visitors saw #3 Bailey Perre make a crucial stick lift to prevent them on the breakaway at 9:00 - the pressure wasn't relieved even then as #12 Kieran Brown received the first penalty of the game sitting two-minutes for cross-checking at 10:27. On the powerplay, Hull looked to utilise their player advantage and bring the score level, but #9 Jordan Buesa was quick to close down any Hull player who received the puck, limiting their chances.

It was the home side who looked more threatening during the two-minutes despite being on the penalty kill. #95 Mac Howlett was denied by McLaughlin on the breakaway at 11:50 before he set up #37 Matt Barron for another shorthanded chance, but the Canadian import was denied by the bar.

The Knights returned to full strength and were then sent on a powerplay of their own as #91 Nathan Salem sat two-minutes for cross-checking at 13:07. #11 Matt Haywood tried to slip the puck past McLaughlin at the near post before #9 Jordan Buesa forced the goalie to make a save on the right, but the lead wasn't extended as the Seahawks killed the penalty successfully.

At 17:52, #16 Sam Towner led a breakaway chance for the Seahawks that saw #96 Owen Sobchak break free through the middle and try to shoot past the Leeds netminder backhanded, but #31 Sam Gospel made the glove save to deny him and the opening 20 minutes of playoff hockey were over.

Second period (6-2)

Tensions rising at the end of the first period in typical Yorkshire derby fashion resulted in #95 Mac Howlett and #72 Jordan McLaughlin both receiving two-minute minors for misconduct - #5 Rhys Edwards sat for the Seahawks and the game remained five-on-five.

Just 54 seconds in and the Knights were rippling the back of the net once again. #91 Jake Witkowski intercepted a pass #94 Declan Balmer intended to reach #24 Brock Bartholomew behind the net with the American laying the puck off to #11 Matt Haywood who deked Balmer and McLaughlin before firing into an empty net to score his brace.

A big response was needed from the Seahawks who now trailed by two, but #19 Innes Gallacher quickly destroyed hopes of that as he scored a second Leeds goal within 90 seconds - picking the puck up on the blue-line, the Scottish forward drove into the Seahawks' zone and shot low on the goalie's left from eight yards out in the slot to make it 4-1 to the Knights at 22:21.



Hull tried to break forwards quickly, but Gospel shut down the attack and the puck was back in the home sides possession as Howlett got another breakaway chance at 24:07, but McLaughlin produced the save to keep his side in with a chance.

Penalties against #96 Owen Sobchak, #56 Thomas Stublely and #95 Mac Howlett for roughing at 27:30 put the Knights on the powerplay, and #9 Jordan Buesa was quick to capitalise with a powerplay goal from the top of the right circle assisted by #11 Matt Haywood and #91 Jake Witkowski at 28:03.

A two-minute penalty for charging against #74 Lee Bonner at 29:17 put the Seahawks quickly back on the penalty kill, but strong defending limited Leeds' chances and no further goals were conceded.

Reaching the halfway point in the game, the Knights had been a force as the playoff fixture was played with the intensity and drive needed if they wished to defend their playoff title most definitely showcased. The dominance and control of Aldridge's side was limiting Hull's time with the puck, making them unable to settle and work themselves back into the game.

#19 Innes Gallacher was next to win possession, playing the puck to #33 Finn Bradon who had assisted his earlier goal, but the forward couldn't get a shot off.



With less than eight minutes of the period to play, #31 Sam Gospel made a crucial save as he stretched himself across the width of his goal to deny #11 Finlay Ulrick from reducing the deficit. The visitors continued to try and find a way through the Knights, but they struggled to get control of the puck in their offensive zone as Leeds continued to battle. #15 Jamie Chilcott shot wide on the left at 34:02 with Gospel making a pad block a minute-later to prevent a low shot from the left from squeezing past him, but there were no Grade-A chances for Matty Davies' side.

After a few minutes with less control than they had been used to during the game, Leeds regained the puck through #11 Matt Haywood and #91 Jake Witkowski – the American created space for himself

down centre ice, deking #94 Declan Balmer and shooting towards McLaughlin. The puck rebounded off the goalie's pads and into the path of #12 Kieran Brown who was presented with an almost empty net as McLaughlin had been drawn to the right. The prolific goal scorer picked his spot and made it 6-1 at 35:52.

Another close chance for the hosts saw the Seahawks' defence required to think fast and retrieve the puck to prevent another Knights goal. The visitors then went on an attack of their own and they managed to reduce the deficit by one as #21 Bobby Chamberlain got on the end of #24 Brock Bartholomew's pass, poking it past Gospel who stretched across his goal but was beaten at 37:42.

With 1:46 to play, Gospel made a save with #71 Emil Svec and #54 Noah McMullin then receiving two-minutes each for roughing. #12 Kieran Brown joined them at 39:49 as he sat two-minutes for roughing with the period ending 6-2 to the Knights.

Third period (8-3)

The Knights began the third and final period with 1:48 remaining on the penalty kill, but there were no clear-cut chances for the visitors to capitalise upon despite their player advantage.

#71 Emil Svec received two-minutes for slashing at 44:30 with Leeds on another powerplay. #24 Brock Bartholomew deflected #91 Jake Witkowski's shot from the right before #12 Kieran Brown was trying to set up former Glasgow forward #11 Matt Haywood with a chance to score his hat-trick, but the Seahawks did well to deny them.

Time was running out with Hull close to killing the penalty, but with ten seconds left, #8 Bow Neely made sure the Knights made the most of the powerplay opportunity; he picked up the puck in the defensive zone, cutting around the outside at centre ice, driving down the right flank and around the zone before squaring the puck across the crease through the Hull defencemen to the #37 Matt Barron to slot home at the back post at 46:20.

With more work now to be done to reduce the deficit, the visitors forced Gospel to make a glove save followed by a pad block. The physicality was increasing alongside temperatures rising as the hits became harder between the two rivals. Hull battled more ferociously for the puck, but the Leeds pressure persisted, and #22 Jordan Fisher received a two-minute minor for cross-checking at 52:19 as he fought to stop the league champions.

#12 Kieran Brown went down behind the net but still managed to work the puck to #91 Jake Witkowski who added a goal to his four assists for a five-point night - his goal was timed at 53:07.

The clock ran down the final few minutes with the Seahawks grabbing a late consolation goal at 58:23 - #94 Declan Balmer's shot through traffic from the face-off win was denied entrance to the goal by Gospel's outstretched leg, but the rebound was met by #16 Sam Towner who slotted it home at Gospel's near post for his second of the night, assisted by #74 Lee Bonner and #11 Finlay Ulrick.

It was a dominant performance from the Knights on home ice with a win over their Yorkshire rivals sealing the first win of the playoffs. The reverse fixture takes place on Sunday night in Hull.



Match report written by Emily Laycock