

## Hull Seahawks 3-6 Leeds Knights: Four-point playoff weekend (7<sup>th</sup> April 2024)



With a healthy Yorkshire rivalry developed during a NIHL National season and National Cup campaign that has seen the two sides meet eight times, producing four wins apiece, playoff hockey between the Morley Glass Leeds Knights and Hull Reckitt Seahawks was no different this weekend.

Playoff campaigns for both sides began with a Yorkshire derby double header with the Knights coming out on top on both occasions starting with an 8-3 win on home ice on Friday before picking up another two points on the road in Hull on Sunday, beating the Seahawks by six goals to three.

Ryan Aldridge's side are top of Group A, level on points with the Peterborough Phantoms who enjoyed a four-point weekend over the Bees, but the Knights are ahead on goal difference. Whilst two defeats puts Matty Davies' Seahawks in fourth place, their fate is yet to be decided with a new format to playoffs this season leaving them with four games to turn it around; however, there is little room for error moving forwards.

### First period (0-2)

The Knights travelled with a squad of 17+2 - #19 Innes Gallacher the only absentee from Friday night's win - whilst the Seahawks iced with a squad of 16+2, opting for #72 Jordan McLaughlin in between the pipes, facing #31 Sam Gospel taking his usual position in the opposing net for the visitors.

The puck was dropped at the Hull Ice Arena and #12 Kieran Brown was quick to put the hosts under pressure as he drove down the right-hand side before cutting into the crease and trying to test McLaughlin. The Seahawks then took possession of the puck, but not for long as #44 Jordan Griffin dispossessed #71 Emil Svec, passing to #41 Oli Endicott who shot but was denied by the glove of McLaughlin at 3:03.

Svec took the first penalty of the game at 3:10 when he received two-minutes for boarding #6 Ethan Hehir, sending the Knights on the powerplay. Continuous pressure from the league champions wasn't rewarded until 18 seconds remained when #37 Matt Barron tipped in #95 Mac Howlett's shot from the left circle to open the scoring and give Leeds the lead in the Yorkshire derby.

Looking to respond quickly, Hull picked up the puck and drove into the offensive zone. #96 Owen Sobchak played a pass down the middle to #21 Bobby Chamberlain, but his



effort went wide of the net before #11 Finlay Ulrick was shooting - Gospel was equal to his attempt and the score remained 1-0.

Continuing the pressure, #71 Emil Svec forced a huge block from the Leeds netminder when he picked up a loose puck on the blue line and fired a shot at Gospel at 8:30 before #15 Jamie Chilcott shot from distance and a moment of panic ensued for the Knights in front of their own net.

#41 Oli Endicott looked to relieve the pressure on his team's defencemen, battling for the puck and winning possession. A chance fell to #6 Ethan Hehir at 9:20, but McLaughlin stretched to his right just enough to deflect the puck wide off his pads. #91 Jake Witkowski was the next Knight with the puck, but he couldn't control it enough to get a shot off and #21 Bobby Chamberlain was intercepting and clearing the potential danger.

The strong Seahawks defence continued as they desperately tried to remain only a goal down with #94 Declan Balmer lifting his stick to block #12 Kieran Brown's shot from the left after the captain rapidly skated down the right boards, looking to attack.



A series of chances fell to #96 Owen Sobchak as the Canadian import looked to bring the score level at ten-minutes. He fired first on the breakaway but was denied by Gospel with the puck falling almost perfectly back into his possession, but he couldn't convert the loose puck. The Knights sent the puck back into Hull's defensive zone with Hehir almost finding Endicott, but McLaughlin was quick to react and Sobchak claimed it once again, driving towards Gospel: his shot was saved by the goalie but spilt with #71 Emil Svec almost the closest to capitalising upon the rebound.

#11 Matt Haywood was sent to the penalty box at 12:50 having received two-minutes for tripping and the home side were on the powerplay. The Seahawks passed the puck with precision around the Knights' zone, but they couldn't get it past Gospel who pulled off some big saves to deny the rivals. #71 Emil Svec fired a shot from the right circle at 14-minutes, forcing Gospel to deflect the puck beyond his net with his shoulder before #15 Jamie Chilcott was firing through traffic with another testing shot dealt with well by the netminder.

The Knights returned to full strength after a successful penalty kill and were immediately back on the front foot, extending their lead at 16:26 courtesy of #37 Matt Barron once again. He retrieved the puck in the neutral zone on the right, drove down the ice alone before firing over #72 Jordan McLaughlin's left-shoulder into the top corner, beating the netminder at his near post.

The next player in the penalty box was #96 Owen Sobchak who received two-minutes for hooking at 17:30, sending the Knights on the powerplay. #14 Lewis Baldwin shot through traffic, but his shot was deflected away from the net before #91 Jake Witkowski was denied by the bar with a shot from the right circle as the Seahawks continued to kill the penalty. #31 Sam Gospel was then called upon to make a reaction save as #21 Bobby Chamberlain darted into Hull's offensive zone as they returned to full strength, shooting fiercely at the netminder who made the save with the puck flying into the air and the period coming to an end with a Matt Barron brace giving the visitors a two-goal lead.

## Second period (4-1)

55 seconds into the middle frame, #21 Bobby Chamberlain received two-minutes for roughing, and it took #95 Mac Howlett only 32 seconds on the powerplay to utilise the player advantage and extend his side's lead to three. Claiming the puck up in his own zone, Howlett danced through the middle, weaving through the Seahawks players before slotting it past McLaughlin with #8 Bow Neely recording the assist.

Hull returned to full strength, but the Knights' pressure didn't relent as #14 Lewis Baldwin fired two shots from distance at the goalie and #91 Jake Witkowski forced a reaction save from McLaughlin: he had to be alert to deny the American import when he shot from in front on the end of a pass from the captain.



A hit on #8 Bow Neely who was skating down the left flank with intent, saw #94 Declan Balmer receive two-minutes for boarding at 24:32 with the hosts required to kill yet another penalty, and they did so successfully with Leeds creating few chances to properly test McLaughlin and #11 Finlay Ulrick easing the pressure on his team's defencemen as he flew down the right wing before feeding the puck to #96 Owen Sobchak who tried to score shorthanded, but mistimed his attempt.

The Seahawks increased the pressure as they returned to full strength, but strong defending was still required as Leeds refused to lay off the attack with #94 Declan Balmer working hard to deny #91 Jake Witkowski a shot at goal. Eventually, the increased intensity from the home side paid off when #94 Declan Balmer beat Gospel just after the halfway point. #31 Sam Gospel made the initial save to deny #11 Finlay Ulrick but the puck worked its way back into the possession of a Seahawk. #24 Brock Bartholomew squared the puck to Balmer who fired through traffic from just inside the blue line into Gospel's top left-hand corner, reducing the deficit to two at 31:19.

#9 Jordan Buesa quickly halted the cheers from the home fans with an immediate response just 30 seconds later as he got on the end of a feed from #95 Mac Howlett, driving into the offensive zone before beating McLaughlin with a backhanded finish into the top left corner, reinstating the Knights' three-goal lead.

Fuelled by the big celebration of Buesa's goal, the visitors looked for a fifth with #12 Kieran Brown trying to set up #11 Matt Haywood and #33 Finn Bradon trying to slip it past McLaughlin at the near post, but he was denied by the goalie's pads. Another chance for the Knights saw #37 Matt Barron break into the offensive zone, followed by #95 Mac Howlett who was denied by McLaughlin with the puck falling loose to his right, but nobody was there to pounce on the opportunity giving #24 Brock Bartholomew time to clear.

A penalty against #3 Bailey Perre for high sticks at 36:38 sent the home side on the powerplay. With a minute of the penalty played, #11 Finlay Ulrick fired a one-timer from the left circle, but it was denied entrance to the goal by Gospel's pads which sent the puck loose in the slot, but nobody could tap it home at the back door into the empty net.

#95 Mac Howlett then skated down the left wing on the breakaway, assisted by #11 Matt Haywood who he laid the puck off to, but the veteran couldn't control it to score shorthanded and Leeds returned to full strength with the period ending with the visitors leading by four goals to one.

### Third period (6-3)

Three goals were needed from the Seahawks to turn the game around and #11 Finlay Ulrick got the third and final period off to the best possible start with a goal just 52 seconds in. #96 Owen Sobchak worked his way through the offensive zone before playing a pinpoint pass to Ulrick waiting at the back post to tap home at 40:52. The pressure continued from Hull, but Gospel limited them to just one goal as he made the blocks, and the Knights were back on the attack within seconds.

#11 Matt Haywood tried to feed #12 Kieran Brown, but #72 Jordan McLaughlin dived to prevent the pass, getting his stick to it before the captain could control it. #14 Lewis Baldwin fired a shot towards the chest of McLaughlin and then #54 Noah McMullin was forcing a glove save as he sought to reinstate his side's three-goal advantage.

At 46:09, #91 Jake Witkowski fed the puck to #12 Kieran Brown who dangled past McLaughlin before slotting the puck backhanded into the empty net. Hull then worked the puck back into the Knights' zone, but Gospel stood tall again, absorbing the pressure and denying them a route back into the game with just over ten minutes left to play in the Yorkshire derby.

#74 Lee Bonner received two-minutes for tripping at 48:42 sending the visitors on another powerplay, and despite being shorthanded, the hosts worked the puck forwards putting the Knights' defence under pressure as #96 Owen Sobchak combined with #11 Finlay Ulrick, but #12 Kieran Brown got back in time to divert him away from the net. The Seahawks killed the penalty and returned to full strength with the Knights unable to extend their lead further.

The gloves were dropped at 51:14 as #21 Bobby Chamberlain and #41 Oli Endicott absorbed the heat of the derby, both receiving five-minutes for fighting in doing so. The game continued five-on-five until #6 Ethan Hehir followed Endicott into the penalty box sitting two-minutes for delay of game. #96 Owen Sobchak made the most of his side's powerplay opportunity, creating space for himself in front of Gospel before firing it into the roof of the net to reduce the deficit by one at 53:44.



Leeds returned to full strength, but the Hull pressure persisted as they desperately tried to keep themselves in the game: #31 Sam Gospel produced a point-blank save to deny #11 Finlay Ulrick on the edge of the crease.

With four-minutes of the period remaining, #11 Matt Haywood forced McLaughlin to make a save with the rebound falling to #91 Jake Witkowski who fired high over the bar from close range. In an attempt to claw another goal back, #72 Jordan McLaughlin was pulled in favour of an extra skater and #9 Jordan Buesa took full advantage of the exposure at the back. #95 Mac Howlett

switched the play from the right to the left, finding Buesa who fired into an empty net and celebrated in front of the Knights fans ending a four-point playoff weekend for the league champions.

The Knights are back in playoff hockey action on Saturday when they travel to Peterborough to take on the Phantoms before returning to The Castle on Sunday when they play host.

*Match report written by Emily Laycock*