

Leeds Knights vs Bees IHC - 20th April 2024

The Morley Glass Leeds Knights claimed a 7-3 victory over the TSI world Bees IHC in their final home game of the 23/24 season at the Castle on Saturday night, featuring a hat-trick from American Import #91 Jake Witowski. Heading into the game, the Knights required just a single point to secure their place in the playoff weekend in Coventry, as they sat top of group A on 7 points, following a 4-2 victory over the Peterborough Phantoms at home just 6 days prior. Meanwhile, the Bees looked to clench their first points from the playoff rounds after defeats from both Hull Seahawks and Peterborough Phantoms.

The Leeds Knights iced a squad of 18+2 as #6 Ethan Hehir returned to the team after picking up an injury in the game against the Hull Seahawks, whilst #26 Tommy Spraggon, #34 Gregor Mills and #35 Luca Tessadri were unavailable to ice. Regular start #31 Sam Gospel retained his position between the pipes, backed up by Widnes Wild 2-way netminder #32 Harrison Walker.



Meanwhile, the Bees travelled with 14+2, missing #9 Vanya Antonov and Nottingham Panthers 2-way #11 Zaine McKenzie from the previous weeks' lineup. However, they were boosted by the return of D-man #65 Harvey Stead. Bees opted for netminder #44 Brython Preece, backed up by Deeside Dragons netminder #36 Oliver Booth who guested for the visiting team.

1st period - (2-0)

The Leeds Knights lined up with #41 Oli Endicott, #33 Finn Bradon and #19 Innes Gallacher to take the opening face-off against the Bees, with #54 Noah McMullin and #14 Lewis Baldwin in defence to protect #31 Sam Gospel. However, it was #11 Matt Haywood who created the most pressure early on, forcing #44 Brython Preece to make the glove save. The Knights were then called offside after #91 Jake Witowski skated into the zone too quickly as he awaited the pass from #95 Mac Howlett.

The Bees worked on the counter attack as #23 Dominik Gabaj fed the puck to #2 Adam Rosbottom, but he was intercepted in the crease by #14 Lewis Baldwin at 3:19. #33 Finn Bradon then created a breakaway chance for the Knights, but he lost an edge before he could fire at Preece from the right wing. Gabaj collected the puck once more for the Bees but was poke checked by Leeds' #8 Bow Neely on the blue line. Several shots were created by the Endicott, Bradon and Gallacher line but Preece was wise to them all to keep the Knights attack at bay.

Play was end-to-end as both #95 Mac Howlett and #91 Aidan Doughty found breakout opportunities for their teams, but the scoreline still remained goal-less. However, #91 Jake Witowski opened the scoring for the Knights as he fired top corner from a tight angle on the left wing, after picking up the rebound from his initial shot at 10:52. Bees were forced to ice the puck following the goal as Leeds continued to apply the pressure on the opposing net.



Minutes later, #91 Jake Witowski found the opposite top corner from his 1st, after a well-worked play between #11 Matt Haywood and #9 Jordan Buesa at 14:37 allowed him to fire from point, doubling the lead for Leeds. Bees' #29 Gianni Vitali quickly looked for a way to answer back,

but Gospel stood tall once more. The first penalty of the game was handed to #74 Liam Morris for cross-checking after shoving #9 Jordan Buesa into the net at 18:13. The Knights came close to extending their lead on the man advantage after #95 Mac Howlett hit the crossbar, #41 Oli Endicott attempted the wrap-around and #54 Noah McMullin fired a one-timer but failed to find a third before the end of the opening period.

2nd period - (6-1)

The Bees returned back to full strength shortly after the middle frame face-off but were forced to remain on the defensive play as the firepower of Leeds' Howlett and Neely was displayed once more from the blue line. The Knights cycled the puck around the Bees' zone after the guests were called for icing, but Preece prevented an extension to the scoreline. The Bees came close to reducing the deficit after #74 Liam Morris created a breakaway chance, but he was stopped by the mighty McMullin with a poke check on the left wing.

Play was paused momentarily at 26:40 as blood was needed to be cleared from the ice in the Bees' zone after Preece made yet another save, this time after a snipe from #9 Jordan Buesa. The break seemed to benefit the Bees as they created arguably their biggest chance yet of the game, forcing Gospel to slide across the net as he dived for the puck before #23 Dominik Gabaj could slot it home for his side. However, #95 Mac Howlett executed a perfect snipe down the opposite end of the rink, sending the puck flying in and back out of the net from the sheer force he hit it with to make it 3-0 at 27:58, assisted by #37 Matt Barron and #11 Matt Haywood.



The game was stopped yet again after #19 Innes Gallacher was hit in the face with a stick behind the Bees goal and blood was cleared from the ice for the 2nd time inside 4 minutes. The Knights answered back for their teammate in the best way possible, as #91 Jake Witowski claimed his hat-trick goal, finding

top shelf for the 3rd time at 31:01, assisted by defencemen #54 Noah McMullin and #24 Dylan Hehir, posting the score to 4-0. The league

champions' firepower was unleashed once more within the same minute at 31:57 as #37 Matt Barron extended the lead to 5-0, tidying up the loose change in the crease after the initial strike from #95 Mac Howlett.

Bees' #23 Dominik Gabaj picked up a penalty at 34:26, after he found the only way to stop Jake Witowski was to concede a high sticks call. However, during their powerplay, the Knights were called for too many skaters at 35:33, leaving play 4on4. Although, the roles were reversed seconds later after #11 Matt Haywood received a hooking penalty at 35:50 giving Bees the man advantage.

The fifth goal from the Knights made the Bees even more determined to reduce the deficit, which they eventually did so at 37:23 through #21 Marcel Balaz who slotted the puck under #31 Sam Gospel following a scramble in the crease, assisted by #73 Ed Bradley to post the score at 5-1. The Bees came close to finding another just seconds later, but Gospel slid across the crease to deny #27 Josh Smith a back door tap in, set up by #23 Dominik Gabaj.



Leeds however quickly answered back to re-claim their 5-goal advantage through assistant Captain #11 Matt Haywood who faked the initial pass, then fired from point after the feed from defenceman #14 Lewis Baldwin at 39:14. The Knights then headed into

the final period with not only a solid 6-1 lead, but with the news that their playoff place had been secured following a 5-6 overtime loss for their Yorkshire derby rivals, Hull Seahawks.

3rd period - (7-3)

The Bees were arguably the more attacking of the 2 sides in the opening minutes of the 3rd period, but once more #31 Sam Gospel was wise to every shot made. A major chance came the Bees' way at 43:16 after Bees' top-points scorer #23 Dominik Gabaj worked the puck around the Leeds zone and forced Gospel to make the glove save after he fired a laser beam from the top of the right face-off zone. However, just 4 seconds later, #2

Adam Rosbottom converted with a tip in for the Bees IHC from the initial snipe by #74 Liam Morris after #23 Dominik Gabaj won the offensive zone face-off at 43:20.

The 2nd goal of the night for the Bees gave them a new-found offensive pressure, but Gospel continued to make several glove and pad saves for Leeds. The Knights gave Bees an opportunity to claw another goal back at 46:36, following a delay of game call on GB u20s forward #41 Oli Endicott, which they did so to post the score at 6-3 approaching the final 10 minutes of the game. Bees' #27 Josh Smith fired from the left wing after both #23 Dominik Gabaj and #75 Brendan Baird worked the puck around the Leeds zone, forcing Gospel out of position at 47:40.

The Knights wasted no time and quickly returned back to the attack as Endicott was released from the penalty box, with a feed to Archer from Bow Neely along the right wing, causing a scramble in the crease at 50:46. However, the Bees overturned the puck seeing both goal scorers #2 Rosbottom and #23 Gabaj link up to force Gospel to make the chest save in the crease.



Moments later, Leeds were given a man advantage of their own as #21 Marcel Balaz was handed a tripping penalty at 51:54. It seemed only right that the Leeds Knights Captain claimed the final goal of the closing home game at The Castle for the 23/24 season at 53:27 on the powerplay. #12 Kieran

Brown fired the puck over Preece's glove on the one-timer courtesy of the feed from behind the Bees' net by #95 Mac Howlett, after a board battle between #37 Matt Barron and #74 Liam Morris allowed him to pick up the loose puck.

The Knights continued their attacking force and looked to further extend their lead as once again Howlett and Brown connected on the wings, but the final shot from Leeds' #95 pinged the wrong way off the pipes. Tensions then spilled in the closing moments of the game, seeing #2 James Archer sit his final minutes of professional hockey in the penalty box as he was

called for roughing on #74 Liam Morris at 58:16, cheered off by the ever-present Leeds Knights fans.

The Bees sent a final attempt Gospel's way via a one-timer from #74 Liam Morris, but he was denied with a catcher save, to seal both a 7-3 victory in the final game of the overall season at the Castle plus a playoff semi-final spot for the back-to-back 2023/2024 League Champions, Leeds Knights.



MVPs were awarded to the one and only #2 James Archer for the Leeds Knights in his final match before hanging up the skates on a stellar 20-year career. Meanwhile, #2 Adam Rosbottom claimed the title for the Bees in their penultimate game of the 23/24 season.

After finishing top of Group A in the playoff standings with 11 points, the Leeds Knights are set to take on the 2nd place of Group B Swindon Wildcats at the Coventry Skydome in the 1st semi-final for a 1:30pm face-off on Saturday 27th April. The Knights will be eager to complete a repeat of last year when they lifted the NIHL National Playoff trophy after overturning the Raiders IHC 5-4 in the 2022/2023 season final, following an initial 7-6 victory over the Telford Tigers in the semi-final match up.



Officials: Anderson, Emerson, Arnold, Staniforth

Leeds Knights: Jake Witowski 3+0, Mac Howlett 1+2, Matt Barron 1+2, Kieran Brown 1+1, Matt Haywood 1+1, Jordan Buesa 0+2, Ethan Hehir 0+1, Lewis Baldwin 0+1

Sam Gospel - (6/7/12) 25 shots

Bees IHC: Marcel Balaz 1+0, Adam Rosbottom 1+0, Josh Smith 1+0, Dominik Gabaj 0+2, Ed Bradley 0+1, Liam Morris 0+1, Brendan Baird 0+1

Brython Preece - (12/14/11) 37 shots

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