

Leeds Knights 4-2 Peterborough Phantoms: Victory at The Castle to round off playoff weekend two for the Knights (14th April 2024)



Playoff weekend two, game two saw the Morley Glass Leeds Knights bounce back from the penalty shootout defeat the evening prior, with a 4-2 victory over the Phantoms at The Castle. Victorious in six out of six league games against Peterborough, the Knights were statistically expected to come out on top this weekend, but with playoff hockey at its finest, they retrieved a singular point on the road on Saturday before returning to home ice and putting on a show in front of their home support.

The league champions retained their position at the top of Group A with seven points after the second

weekend of playoff fixtures with a third and final weekend against Bees IHC coming up. The Knights are another step to closer to Coventry, and another step closer to defending their playoff title.

First period (1-0)

The Knights iced with the same squad of 17+2 from the evening prior, led out by #31 Sam Gospel with #6 Ethan Hehir, #26 Tommy Spraggon and #34 Gregor Mills absent. The Phantoms travelled with a squad of 16+2 with #33 Jordan Marr taking his position in between the pipes and the absence of #77 Martin Susters the only change from the reverse fixture as he served a ban.

#41 Oli Endicott, #33 Finn Bradon, #19 Innes Gallacher, #8 Bow Neely and #24 Dylan Hehir joined Gospel on the ice for the opening face-off with playoff home game two officially underway. The tone of the game was immediately set with the physicality presenting itself as the young line produced hard hits from the off. #11 Matt Haywood was the first to work the puck towards #33 Jordan Marr with a shot one minute in, but he was denied by the netminder's pads at the near post with a link-up between #95 Mac Howlett and #37 Matt Barron the next to cause a pad save.

The first break for the visitors saw #45 Callum Buglass shoot high over Gospel and the puck was then straight back into the possession of the hosts as #12 Kieran Brown had a chance to open the scoring. The captain recovered the puck and tried again but Marr stood tall and the puck was sent to the boards in the right corner with Haywood and Brown battling to retrieve it. #91 Jake Witkowski's attempt at 3:58 was denied by a Phantoms stick and #23 Brad Bowering took advantage of the loose puck, weaving through the middle, but he couldn't get a shot off as he was shut down by the Knights defencemen.

A penalty against #9 Jordan Buesa for slashing gave the Phantoms a two-minute powerplay at 4:13. #31 Sam Gospel made a big save to deny the visitors from finding the back of the net at 5:17 with #5 Ivan Björkly Nordström close to capitalising upon the rebound from the point, but the net moved behind the Knights netminder, and the whistle was blown. #95 Mac Howlett thundered forwards shorthanded, relieving the pressure from the Knights defence as they furiously killed the penalty: he controlled the puck and worked it around Marr's net before firing a shot from the top of the right circle, forcing #33 Jordan Marr to make the save.

The home side returned to full strength and the pressure in the visitors' defensive zone increased as the league champions sought the opening goal. After close chances from #12 Kieran Brown and #95 Mac Howlett, #37

Matt Barron finally got the puck beyond Marr with the opening goal of the game scored by the Canadian import at 8:44. #24 Dylan Hehir fired the puck on net with Barron waiting in the crease to direct it past Marr and give the Knights a deserved lead. The second assist was awarded to #9 Jordan Buesa.

#19 Innes Gallacher and #33 Finn Bradon were close to scoring a second just moments later, but Marr came out to deny them and the puck was cleared #25 Billy Thorpe. The Leeds Knights captain didn't allow his side to be without the puck for long as he battled in the neutral zone and fired a shot towards goal, but his effort was blocked by the stick of a Phantoms player on its way towards Marr.

The Knights were sent on their first powerplay of the night at 10:17 when #8 Louie Kynaston received two-minutes for slashing. #19 Luke Ferrara tried to break shorthanded for the visitors after a face-off in his side's defensive zone, but #54 Noah McMullin quickly shut the attack down and retrieved possession of the puck.



Pressure from the home side on the powerplay didn't amount to anything as the visitors returned to full strength unscathed, but the dominance didn't relent as #95 Mac Howlett picked up the puck on the left and fired a shot at #33 Jordan Marr - the netminder made the pad block but Howlett chased the rebounded puck around the net, turning #23 Brad Bowering before unleashing another shot, this time from the right. Marr stood tall to deny the hosts despite the intense pressure.

The puck remained predominantly in the Phantoms' defensive zone and even when it slipped momentarily into the neutral zone, the Knights were quick to chase it down.

#95 Mac Howlett worked it down the boards on the right-hand side with three-minutes of the period to play before laying it off to #37 Matt Barron who tried to pull it back to #19 Innes Gallacher waiting in the slot, but he mistimed his pass. Recovering the puck, he took it around the net and found Howlett again with the forward shooting but being denied by the chest of the netminder.

#31 Sam Gospel was called into action as the clock ran down the final minute of the period, preventing #19 Luke Ferrara from tying the game as the visitors tried to create something with the puck in the Knights' defensive zone. The end of period buzzer sounded with the Knights taking a one-goal lead into the second period, courtesy of #37 Matt Barron.

Second period (1-1)

The pressure and intensity from the first period was noticeable the second the puck dropped for the second with Gospel making an early glove save and Howlett and Haywood directing testing shots at Marr. #91 Jake Witkowski fired a shot from the right at the netminder who was able to block it with his pads leading himself and #33 Finn Bradon to battle behind the net to retrieve the puck and try again.

With almost five-minutes of the period played, a close chance fell the way of #37 Matt Barron as Leeds dominated possession of the puck in their offensive zone: a feed from Brown on the right wing left the puck to the Canadian who tried to slip it in at the near post, but Marr was wise to the move and the attack was dismissed.

In need of an equaliser early in the period, the Phantoms then took control of the puck and dashed into the home side's defensive zone with #91 Lukas Sladkovsky causing Gospel to clear with his shoulder after a shot from the left wing, followed by a close chance for #24 Austin Mitchell-King that the netminder dived across his

net to save, maintaining the Knights' lead at 26:04. The pressure from the visitors persisted with Gospel repeatedly called upon to prevent the puck entry to his net: #24 Austin Mitchell-King missed a crucial chance for the Phantoms at 27:48 when the puck fell to him in the crease, just needing to be tipped past the goalie.

Despite #95 Mac Howlett and #19 Innes Gallacher trying to cause trouble at the other end of the ice with the latter close to poking home a second goal for Leeds at 28:29, the visitors were next to find the back of the net through #19 Luka Ferrara on the counter attack: #91 Lukas Sladkovsky took the initial shot with Gospel making the save, but the rebound fell to Ferrara who converted the opportunity into an equaliser for the Phantoms at 28:51.

A penalty was then called against #3 Bailey Perre who received two-minutes for holding at 29:36, sending the Knights on another penalty kill. The Phantoms had the player advantage, but the Knights looked the more threatening of the two sides as they sought to reinstate their lead with #12 Kieran Brown breaking shorthanded, his shot denied by Marr. With the puck back in the possession of the visitors, Gospel was forced to make the block at 30:59, but #95 Mac Howlett was quick to pick the puck up and drive towards Marr with 30 seconds of the penalty left to kill.



Strong defensive work and clever shorthanded breaks saw the Knights return to full strength with the score still level. #41 Oli Endicott was close to beating Marr multiple times as the game surpassed the halfway point, but the netminder was equal to his efforts. The forward's shot at 33:04 led to an interference penalty being given against #23 Brad Bowering, sending the Knights on a two-minute powerplay.

#54 Noah McMullin shot from distance through traffic, looking to make use of his side's player advantage early in the powerplay, but it was sent wide on its way to Marr with the Canadian import then straight back into defensive mode as #19 Luke Ferrara tried to break shorthanded, but Gospel was there to make the save. #11 Matt Haywood tried to slip the puck past Marr at his near post with a shot from the left before #33 Jordan Marr made a big save to deny #19 Innes Gallacher who approached with speed on the right, firing a shot that was met by the chest of the netminder.

A strong penalty kill unit from the Phantoms prevented Leeds from scoring and they returned to full strength with five-minutes of the period left to plays. #8 Louie Kynaston then tried to wrap the puck around Gospel's net, aiming for the top shelf, but Gospel prevented the visitors from taking the lead.

A huge opportunity came the way of Leeds just second later; battling for possession of the puck in the defensive zone, #95 Mac Howlett and #19 Innes Gallacher dug relentlessly to free the puck from the boards and create an attack that saw Howlett dance right through the middle of the ice and into the Knights' offensive zone. He laid the puck off to his left where Gallacher was darting forwards - the Scottish forward worked it towards Marr before squaring it across the face of goal to Howlett waiting at the back post, but his effort was millimetres from connecting with the back of the net.

The period ended with the score level as the Phantoms fought back in the middle frame to score an equaliser and make the third period all to play for.



Third period (4-2)

It took the Knights only two-minutes and 33 seconds to get on the scoresheet as the final period got underway in Leeds. A shot from distance rebounded off the pads of #33 Jordan Marr who did well to make the initial save, but #9 Jordan Buesa was waiting in the crease to collect, and he controlled the puck before turning and firing it into the roof of net - Marr was unable to get a glove up to prevent it as he was still down. The goal was assisted by #95 Mac Howlett and #37 Matt Barron.

A third goal looked almost inevitable with the home side applying the pressure and Marr made to work hard to keep the puck out of his net. #12 Kieran Brown forced a pad block with nobody there to collect the rebound before #9 Jordan Buesa was picking up another loose puck, but he fired his effort just wide of Marr. The next move was started by #3 Bailey Perre who played the puck towards goal from the left with #95 Mac Howlett waiting at the back door to tap it beyond the netminder, but a Phantom just took it off the end of his stick.

The defence of the visitors was tested as they repeatedly stopped the prolific attackers of Leeds from scoring, but every time they cleared the puck Leeds regained possession and started to create another attack leaving the visitors no time to lose concentration. When the hosts gave the puck away in the neutral zone, a chance came for Peterborough to attack with #45 Callum Buglass trying to set up #91 Lukas Sladkovsky, but the defence of the league champions closed down the attack within seconds, leaving Gospel untested.

The pressure started up again with #41 Oli Endicott shooting from the left and forcing a pad block before #14 Lewis Baldwin fired one in from the blue line. A mis-timed back pass from #91 Jake Witkowski then gave #5 Ivan Björkly Nordström the chance to break at 49:33 with Gospel forced to make the breakaway save as Nordström went one-on-one with him.

Ten seconds later, #54 Noah McMullin extended the lead of the home side to two, assisted by #91 Jake Witkowski and #11 Matt Haywood with the goal timed at 49:43. This prompted the Phantoms head coach to call a timeout and the effect was immediate as the pressure from the visitors increased. A low drive from #91 Lukas Sladkovsky caused Gospel to make the pad block at 51:40 before the Knights were back on the attack themselves through #33 Finn Bradon who tried to capitalise upon a defensive mistake from #25 Billy Thorpe, but Marr made the save.

A face-off in Leeds' defensive zone was won by the Phantoms at 53:29 with the puck played back to #93 Ales Padelek who fired a slapshot from the point past Gospel to reduce the deficit to one. The goal was assisted by #5 Ivan Björkly Nordström and #29 Will Weldon.

It wasn't until #33 Jordan Marr vacated his net with 30 seconds of the period left to play that the hosts would find the back of the net again. Sending Marr to the bench in favour of an extra skater, the visitors put the Knights under pressure in their defensive zone - that was until #9 Jordan Buesa won the puck and sent #95 Mac Howlett on his way to fire into the empty net from the neutral zone and make it 4-2 to the league champions.

A strong performance on home ice saw the Knights bounce back from the penalty shootout defeat in Peterborough with seven points collected from a possible eight so far. Ryan Aldridge's side sit at the top of Group A with a double-header against Bees IHC coming up for the final weekend of playoffs before Coventry.

Match report written by Emily Laycock