

## Leeds Knights 5-1 Telford Tigers: Five unanswered goals in victory at The Castle (19<sup>th</sup> January 2024)

Friday night hockey in Leeds saw the Morley Glass Leeds Knights welcome the Telford Tigers to The Castle for the second time this season. The Knights were coming into the game off the back of a terrific 7-5 victory at home last Sunday over the Bristol Pitbulls that maintained their position at the top of the NIHL table, whilst the Tigers were also travelling to Yorkshire following a win as they demolished Sheffield Steeldogs 7-0 on January 14th.

### Last time round

The last time the Knights hosted the Tigers, the visitors were off to the perfect start with two goals in the first period, but #9 Jordan Buesa's long shot through bodies in the second period started the comeback with teddies flying onto the ice for the annual Teddy Bear Toss. #95 Mac Howlett brought the score level with a shorthanded equalising goal at the start of the third period, before #9 Jordan Buesa gave the home side the lead at 51:46 with his second goal of the night. The hat-trick was completed as 55:51 with #11 Matt Haywood assisting #9 Jordan Buesa, before Bailey Conger brought the game to a close with the fifth of the night, an unassisted goal. It was two points that extended the Knights' win record at home to six games.



### First period (0-1)

The Knights lined up with the same squad of 19+2 as they did against the Pitbulls with #26 Tommy Spraggon and #35 Luca Tessadri the only two not icing, whilst the Tigers iced with a squad of 18+2 including #43 Archie Hazeldine returning to The Castle to play against his former side.

#31 Sam Gospel took his position in between the pipes for Leeds with #30 Bradley Day in net for the visitors. Aldridge's starting six was completed by #41 Oli Endicott, #33 Finn Bradon, #19 Innes Gallacher, #54 Noah McMullin and #14 Lewis Baldwin.

Straight from face-off, Telford began their test of the Knights with Gospel forced to make an early save at 0:38. The Knights tried to break forward following this, but their passes were intercepted by the Tigers as they struggled to maintain possession of the puck in the opening minutes of the game.

At 4:54 it was the visitors who opened the scoring with an initial shot through bodies blocked, the rebound of which fell perfectly to #16 Finely Howells who was able to collect, assisted by #77 McKenzie and #94 Luka.

Gospel was forced to make a stretched save at 7:25 before the Leeds pressure began, winning possession of the puck behind the net as they tried to create chances to bring the game level.

Despite the Knights going behind, the remainder of the first period was fairly even with both Gospel and Day being called upon in their respective nets, but no grade-A chances being created for either side.



A scramble in front of goal saw the rebound of #14 Lewis Baldwin's shot fall to #12 Kieran Brown at 10:06, but he was denied by Day with #37 Matt Barron's shot also being blocked. The Knights captain tried his luck again as he attempted to slot the puck in at the back door but was once again met by Day who stood tall in net for the Tigers.

The first penalty of the game was against #94 Luka at 16:27, heading to the box for two minutes for hooking, sending the Knights on the powerplay. Despite creating chances, the Knights were unable to capitalise upon their player advantage with the Tigers killing the penalty.

As the Tigers returned to full strength, the Knights were sent on the penalty kill with #95 Mac Howlett serving a two-minute penalty for high sticks.

This brought a difficult period to an end for the Knights who struggled to create any clear-cut chances to punish the visitors, but a huge second period was to follow.

### Second period (3-1)

The Knights began the second period with a 40-second penalty to kill before being sent on the powerplay themselves when #42 Oliver received a two-minute penalty for hooking. #11 Matt Haywood found the rebound of a long shot fall to him in front of net, but he couldn't capitalise upon the chance to bring the game level. #54 Noah McMullin shot through bodies, before #6 Ethan Hehir tried a shot himself as the Knights looked to cause upset early in the second period.



Still in search of the equaliser having returned to full strength, #24 Dylan Hehir sent the puck flying past Day on the 25-minute mark, bringing the game level, assisted by #11 Matt Haywood and #91 Jake Witkowski, and changing the momentum for the following 35 minutes.

It only took two minutes for the Knights to find the back of the net again - the comeback was on. #12 Kieran Brown picked himself up off the ice, collecting the pass from #6 Ethan Hehir for the breakaway before firing into the top left corner of the goal giving the Knights a hard-fought one-goal lead at 27:01.

A new-found intensity saw the Knights look increasingly dangerous in the offensive zone with #11 Matt Haywood pulling the puck back to the waiting #95 Mac Howlett who was dispossessed in the crease before he had a chance to take his shot at 29:05, followed by a shot from #24 Dylan Hehir going just wide of the net.

At 31:38, #54 Noah McMullin extended the Knights' lead to two with a shot through traffic that flew straight past Brad Day in net for the Tigers, assisted by #9 Jordan Buesa and #12 Kieran Brown. It was a goal Knights fans have started to see more and more from the Canadian defenceman who was praised by head coach Ryan Aldridge after the game who said: *"Off the puck, I thought Noah was unbelievable tonight [...] He is a very good player. We had a little battle this week in practice, just messing around, and I didn't realise how strong he is with just one hand on his stick, he was pretty impressive. He has come on leaps and bounds. Having that knock at the start of the year took him back a few steps but he's just been getting better and better every week. He's very hard to play against and he's adding to the offence now, too, - he's turned into a really good player for us."*

The hosts were back on the powerplay at 32:51 with #49 James Smith receiving a two-minute penalty for slashing.

Looking to add to his tally, #54 Noah McMullin forced a glove save from Day before #37 Matt Barron also saw his shot blocked.

The Tigers returned to full strength without sustaining further damage but couldn't retrieve possession of the puck as the Knights continued to drive forward and force the visitors into their defensive zone.

A scramble in front of goal at 35:01 saw #95 Mac Howlett and #91 Jake Witkowski try to find a way past Brad Day to extend their lead to four before the end of the second period, but Day protected his net and kept his side in with a chance of clawing their way back into the game.

The second period ended with the Knights on top at The Castle taking a comfortable two-goal advantage into the third period.

### Third period (5-1)

There were early penalties for both sides at 40:12 as #54 Noah McMullin and #13 Harry Ferguson both sat two-minutes for roughing.

The third period looked much like the first had with no notable chances for either side.

When #33 Finn Bradon received a two-minute minor for high sticks at 44:45, Gospel was called upon in net the Knights as they tried to kill the penalty without conceding, and that they did. #54 Noah McMullin put his body on the line blocking three Telford shots in quick succession as the Knights held onto their two-goal lead.

With ten minutes of the period remaining, #44 Jordan Griffin made a vital block to deny #43 Archie Hazeldine's shot from troubling Gospel with Telford increasing the pressure as they desperately searched for a way through the Knights' defence.

#6 Ethan Hehir sat two minutes for high sticks at 53:00 with the Knights successfully killing the penalty at 55:00.

With time running out, Telford pulled their netminder giving #9 Jordan Buesa the perfect opportunity to score Leeds' fourth of the night as he charged up the ice, slotting the puck into the empty net at 58:13, with #11 Matt Haywood scoring a second empty net goal at 59:40 with a no-look backhanded shot from inside the Knights' own zone to make it five, assisted by #8 Louis Colvin.



The victory extends the Knights' lead at the top of the table to five points after a hard-fought win over the Tigers at The Castle with five goals scored, two by defencemen. The Thermos sponsored MVPs were awarded to #91 Rhodes Mitchell-King for the visitors, and to #54 Noah McMullin for the hosts after another pristine performance at the back and quality shown in front of goal.

The next battle at The Castle is next Friday as Leeds Knights will host MK Lightning in a top-of-the-table clash.

*Match report written by Emily Laycock*

*Photos taken by Jacob Lowe*