

Steep hill ahead for Gens

Defending Memorial Cup champs now major underdogs

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OSHAWA — History is not on the side of the Oshawa Generals as they begin defence of their Ontario Hockey League and Memorial Cup championships on Friday, March 25.

Pegged as a rebuilding season from the outset, the Generals at least accomplished their goal of reaching the playoffs, but in doing so as the eighth seed in the Eastern Conference, the task ahead is onerous.

The Generals will now face a Kingston Frontenacs team that is built for its own championship run after setting franchise records for wins and points and finishing comfortably atop the conference.

The past suggests the job ahead is difficult, but not impossible, as twice before an eighth seed has pulled off the upset since the league adopted the two-conference format in 1998.

It hasn't been done for 11 years, however, and even then, when the Toronto St. Michael's Majors stunned the Mississauga IceDogs in five game, there were only 14 points separating the two.

The Generals can find more inspiration from the 2001-02 season, when the London Knights knocked off the Plymouth Whalers in the opening round despite finishing 36 points back in the regular season.

The Generals wrapped up a 27-33-4-4 campaign with a meaningless 4-2 loss to the Ottawa 67's on Sunday, March 20, which leaves them 35 points behind the 46-17-3-2 Frontenacs.

Head-to-head play doesn't offer much hope, as Kingston won seven of the eight encounters during the regular season, including a 7-0 thrashing on March 18 when the Generals were still fighting for their playoff lives and the Frontenacs rested several key players.

When asked what his team needed to do to make a series of it, first-year head coach Bob Jones was refreshingly honest.

"I don't know," he said. "Obviously a lot of things have to happen. We're going to have to get some bounces, we're going to have to play extremely structured. Specialty teams will be key, goaltending will be key. I don't have an easy answer. A lot of things will have to go right."

History is working against the Frontenacs in one regard as well, given that they haven't won a playoff round in 18 years, dating back to the final season before the two-conference format when they beat the Generals in seven games before falling to London in the quarter-finals.

The Generals can also draw on the fact they are entering the post-season playing some of their best hockey, especially if you throw out the final game.

In winning the battle with the Hamilton Bulldogs for the final playoff berth, the Generals went 7-2-1-0 down the stretch, albeit with both regulation losses coming at the hands of Kingston.

If the Generals have any hope, they will likely need goalie

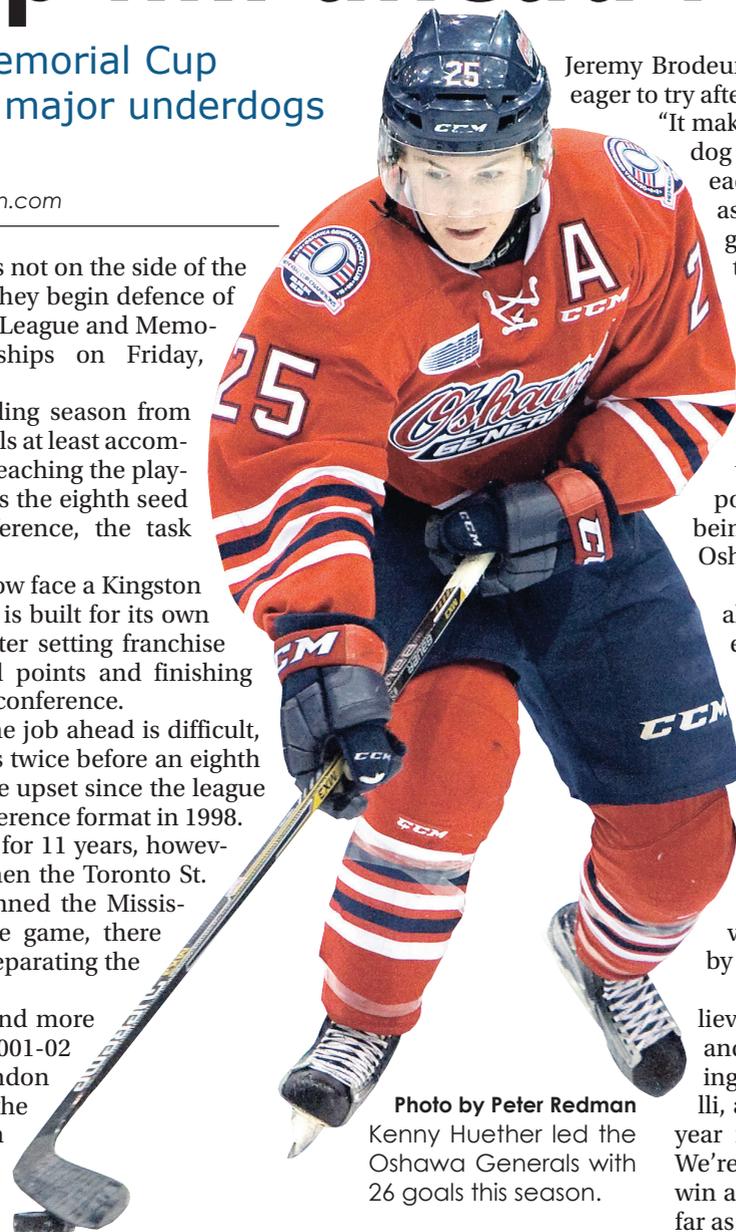


Photo by Peter Redman

Kenny Huether led the Oshawa Generals with 26 goals this season.

Jeremy Brodeur to stand on his head, which he is eager to try after starting 16 of the final 19 games.

"It makes the game fun if you're the underdog and you can make a few big saves each game and keep your team in it as much as you can," he said Sunday, getting a rare day off altogether as the team rested a number of key players. "It's been a long playoff push and we're all really excited to be in the playoffs and feel very fortunate."

The Frontenacs are led up front by Lawson Crouse, Spencer Watson and Michael Dal Colle, who exploded for 27 goals and 55 points in 30 games in Kingston after being dealt at the trade deadline by Oshawa.

Defenceman Stephen Desrocher also brings Memorial Cup experience gained last year with the Generals, while Oshawa has only a handful remaining from that club. Chief among those players is captain Anthony Cirelli, who scored the championship-winning goal last season and walked off with three awards Sunday, including the president's award for overall contribution to the team and the most valuable teammate award voted on by his peers.

"Last year was obviously an unbelievable season. We went all the way and won a Memorial Cup, so that feeling, that's once in a lifetime," said Cirelli, also a healthy scratch Sunday. "This year is obviously a rebuild year for us. We're a younger team and we're trying to win as many games as possible and go as far as we can."

GENERALLY SPEAKING: The Generals drew 6,015 fans to the General Motors Centre Sunday, and averaged a franchise-record 5,372 per game this season, 125 more per game than last season and third most in the league behind London and Kitchener ... The Generals dressed five 1999-born players, six born in 1998 and 14 rookies for Sunday's regular season finale ... **Justin Nichols**, acquired at the overage deadline, made 21 saves in his final OHL regular season start. He brings Memorial Cup experience to the playoffs after leading Guelph to an OHL title two years ago, but didn't play much down the stretch ... **Anthony Cirelli** led the team with 38 assists and 59 points in 62 games, while **Kenny Huether** had a team-leading 26 goals in 64 games ... **Michael McCarron**, part of Oshawa's Memorial Cup winning team last season, scored his first NHL goal in a 4-1 loss for the Montreal Canadiens Sunday against Calgary ... Former Generals defencemen **Colin Suelentrop** and **Matt Petgrave** won the CIS University Cup with the University of New Brunswick Sunday in Halifax. Whitby blue-liner **Marcus McIvor** is also part of the team.

OHL Eastern Conference Quarter-Final Kingston Frontenacs vs. Oshawa Generals

Game 1: Friday, March 25 at Kingston, 7 p.m.

Game 2: Saturday, March 26 at Kingston, 7 p.m.

Game 3: Tuesday, March 29 at Oshawa, 7:05 p.m.

Game 4: Thursday, March 31 at Oshawa, 7:05 p.m.

x-Game 5: Friday, April 1 at Kingston, 7 p.m.

x-Game 6: Sunday, April 3 at Oshawa, 6:05 p.m.

x-Game 7: Tuesday, April 5 at Kingston, 7 p.m.

(x-If necessary)



Dr. Douglas Smith
Guest columnist

Dealing with stress in sports

Most competitive and elite athletes are frequently under extreme pressure to perform at peak levels day in and day out.

Expectations of self, parents, coaches, teammates and friends can produce a host of detrimental effects on the athlete's ability to focus on the relevant tasks in practice, training and competition.

Personal conflicts with work, school, family and relationships can also strain and stretch the player's motivation and desire to compete at the highest levels.

These factors combine with fears, anxieties, external and internal criticism, frustrations, disappointments with mistakes and dealing with failures and losses. These experiences may produce a cascade of overwhelming feelings and thoughts that can lead to athletic dropout, if care is not taken to nurture and heal these internal wounds.

As parents and coaches, we think that our young athletes are impervious to stress and burnout. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Most young performers do not have the ability to express their feelings articulately and clearly. If we ask them how they are feeling about their concerns they will usually give one word answers, like "fine," "OK," "alright".

They know that we as parents and coaches don't want to hear a negative story about their sport or that we are too hard on them. Most youngsters want to do everything they can to please us, even if that means suffering in silence.

So what can parents and coaches do when their athletes are slumping in their performance and not happy with their accomplishments?

Here are just a few suggestions.

Talk to them in a gentle, loving tone and let them know their health and happiness is of utmost concern.

Listen to what they say without making judgments or telling them what to do.

Let them know you support them 100 per cent and will do whatever is necessary to help them get through their issues.

Don't try to do it alone. Parents and coaches are often too close to the problem and can't see the solutions.

Get professional help early before the athlete decides to drop out from the sport or get depressed and have to quit.

Dr. Douglas Smith is a licensed psychologist in Ontario specializing in sport psychology since 1985. Contact him at 905-430-3538 or drdoug@promind.ca; website www.promind.ca