

# Cougars-Winterhawks back on ice tonight

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Momentum is such a huge thing in sports.

The Cougars seemed to have it going for them in a big way while they were up 2-0 and came close to making it a three-goal lead just past the 12-minute mark of their game Thursday in Portland.

But give those Portland Winterhawks credit. They tipped the pendulum the other way and ended up beating the Cougars 5-4 to tie the best-of-seven WHL Western Conference quarterfinal series 2-2 heading into Game 5 tonight at CN Centre (7 p.m. start).

Game 4 was a bit of roller-coaster ride. Following the lead of defence-man Caleb Jones and his four assists, the 'Hawks settled down in their own end and by the end of the first period the game was tied. Their attention to detail on defence cut some slack for their shell-shocked goaltender, Cole Kehler, who had allowed 11 goals in the previous two games, neither of which he'd been allowed to finish.

By the end of the first period the Hawks had the game tied, and they cranked in another one on the power play in the second period to take the lead. But by the second-period break the Cougars' European connection – Nikita Popugaev and Radovan Bondra – had them back in the lead.

That is until Matt Revel got in the scoring act – sending the Portland crowd of 4,491 into a frenzy. The Portland centre took advantage of a couple of failed clearing attempts by the Cougars to pop in a rebound for the tying goal, then with 4 1/2 minutes left he got his stick on former Cougar defence-man Shaun Dosanjh's point shot for the gamewinner.

After an opening 4-2 loss at CN Centre Friday, the Cougars won Game 2 by a 5-1 count. Now it's a clean slate for both teams and a best-of-three series to nail down who moves on to Round 2 of the playoffs. "Again, we played 20 minutes



Prince George Cougars forward Jared Bethune uses his body to protect the puck from Henri Jokiharju of the Portland Winterhawks during Game 2 on March 26 at CN Centre.

out of a 60-minute hockey game and come playoff time that's not going to get it done," said Cougars head coach Richard Matvichuk.

"When we play 60 minutes of hockey we've proven to ourselves and we've proven to everyone else we're tough to beat. But if we only show up and play a quarter of the game it's not going to work."

Inconsistency has plagued the Cougars since the Christmas break and Matvichuk is still looking for the answer.

"It's not about the opposition we're playing," he said. "This is something we've been dealing with for a long time and the good thing is they usually rebound. When we play the way we should we're hard to beat. At times we've got to remember these are still kids and they're still growing into

their own. Some of them are going to be turning pro and it's just a matter of keeping them focused and ready to go."

The Winterhawks' power play went 2-for-4 Thursday, accounting for their second and third goals, while the Cougars were 1-for-3. Matvichuk has been preaching discipline for his team but they haven't exactly been following orders.

"We've taken 35 minors in four hockey games and that's not acceptable," said Matvichuk. "Our guys have to play on that edge but also stay within the rules when they're doing it."

Cougars centre Jansen Harkins, who had a goal and four assists in the Cougars' 6-1 win in Game 3 Wednesday, was held off the scoresheet in Game 4. Playing

on a line with Bondra and Colby McAuley, Harkins his team has to find a way to keep the pressure on and not let up and he's looking forward to having a big Cougar crowd behind the team tonight to inspire a better effort than what they showed Thursday.

"I think we were a bit afraid to play at times, afraid to lose and not going in and not going in and attacking as much as we should," Harkins said. "You can't wait for anything to come to you, you have to push for it or else it's going to come and get you. We have to keep our foot on the pedal when we're up and push for bigger leads, like we did in the other two games."

"It's going to be hard physical games and you're going to have to take some bumps and bruises if you want to go far and that's fine

by me. We're definitely ready for it. It's a mini-series now and this is what you play for, tight games and competitive. It's been really fun so far and hopefully we can get the job done and move on."

Revel, Dosanjh and Keegan Iverson are the three overagers on a very young Portland roster.

Revel, a castoff 20-year-old with five WHL seasons under his belt, was picked up at the roster deadline. An injury limited him to just 11 games for Portland but since his return to action in late-February he's proved a worthy addition. The native of Abbotsford is loving his new lease on life in the playoffs as one of the 'Hawks big brothers.

"Portland has always been good and always been fast, which is a style that fits my game," Revel told Scott Sepich of The Oregonian. "(Winterhawks head coach) Mike Johnston has instilled a lot of confidence in me coming back from injury."

"We talked about getting to the net more tonight, so it was in the back of my mind when the puck went to the point that I needed to get to the front. Shaun made a great shot that came to my backhand and I was able to direct it in. From there it's history I guess."

Both of Revel's goals came while he was standing in close vicinity to Cougars goalie Ty Edmonds, and that's the kind of production Johnston would like to see more often from his team the rest of the series.

A couple Cougars got banged up in Thursday's game. Sam Ruopp took a head shot against the glass in the corner in the second period and halfway through the game Brad Morrison suffered a lower-body injury not related to the sprained ankle that forced him out of the last nine games of the season. He sat on the bench the rest of the game as a precautionary measure but Matvichuk says both players will be ready to tonight.

The series will go back to Portland for Game 6 on Monday. If a seventh game is required, it'll be at CN Centre on Wednesday.

## 'The guys were glad to have you out'

—from page 9

The coaches called us to centre ice for more stretches. Cougars captain Sam Ruopp thanked me for coming out to the practice and the rest of the players tapped their sticks in acknowledgment. The practice was over, much to my disappointment. I didn't want to leave the ice and asked McBride if he would stay out for a bit longer so I could take some shots on him. Thankfully, he obliged.

I felt a little better on my first shot when I put it low into the net behind the veteran goalie. I let go another snapshot from the slot and scored and some of the players let out a cheer, which made me feel good. Nine of us then gathered around McBride for a rebound drill. One guy takes the shot and the idea is to either put the rebound in or try to set up another player with a pass. Being a right-handed shot, I got in position on the left side as the player standing closest to McBride and twice was set up with sweet feeds from my teammates, which I one-timed into the net. Definitely one of the highlights of my day.

I asked McBride if he let me score on purpose just to make me feel better after I blew it in the drills but he said no. "You don't know where your shot's going and I don't know where it's going, so it makes it tough to stop," McBride said. "I let the team down, too, from time to time – it happens to the best of us. It's all good."

I stayed out on the ice for a few more minutes while coach O'Rourke worked on some conditioning drills with Jansen Harkins, who was out with a leg injury. O'Rourke fed Harkins passes in front of the empty net and the Winnipeg Jets prospect fired on the fly directly at the net or delayed his release with a slick toe-drag move. All I could do was look on enviously, like I do when Rusty Nuts skill guys Bob LeDuke or Richard Hartigan deke me out of my jockstrap and leave me fishing for the puck.

Practice was over, but my duties as a Cougar player were far from finished. The players had already started a 40-minute gym workout outside the dressing room when I walked off the ice. For the first time in four years, I was pounding weights. Strength and conditioning coach Kris Russell had the workout plan outlined on the whiteboard and he showed me how to do each exercise. As if the practice wasn't enough to tire me out, that session got my muscles aching.

### 'You skated better than I thought you would'

Cougars head coach Richard Matvichuk had been watching the practice from the stands. I first met Matvichuk back in my Saskatoon Star-Phoenix days in September 1991, when he was 18 and still with the

Saskatoon Blades, on the verge of an NHL career that spanned 14 seasons with Minnesota, Dallas and New Jersey. He'd just been drafted by the Minnesota North Stars and I interviewed him for a story when he was playing in a preseason game at SaskPlace for the North Stars against the Edmonton Oilers. Sitting in his office next to the Cougars' dressing room after the practice, I asked him for an honest assessment of what he thought of my attempts to keep up with his players.

"You were fine, you skated better than I thought you would," said Matvichuk. "I think what you realized is how fast it happens, how fast these kids really are. Most of the people who see the games on Shaw don't realize how good these young men are, because they're close to being at that next level. Skill-wise (comparing me to the players) it's like night and day, and that's why these guys are going to the NHL and you're not."

"The guys were glad to have you out," said the coach. "It was a change of culture and we have to still remember this is a hard-working job for us, but at times you've got to have fun or else there's no sense doing it at all."

Matvichuk promised next time, if it ever happens again, the coaches will brief me beforehand on what's expected in the drills.

"That one-on-one drill was a tough one,

everyone was tired during that one," said Boyd. "We weren't expecting too much from you. It was all fun and games. We weren't the winning team but we still had a lot of fun, especially having you out there, cheering you on and stuff. When you were standing in front of the net there, we actually scored a couple goals."

The players seemed to like having me there to break up their routine.

"It was different – it was good to have oldtimers out like you and the guys enjoyed the fun practice we had," said Anderson. "It was battle practice. You have to target the new guys out there and that's what a lot of guys did with you."

I stood out on the ice for all the wrong reasons, but left with a new appreciation for the off-the-charts skills the Cougars possess and how lucky we are to have the team in Prince George.

"You're a good hardworking player, a character guy who adds a little bit of force to the team, unfortunately we didn't get the win we wanted," said Ruopp, one of my Team Black teammates. "You might have to work on skill or stickhandling but it was nice having you out. You surprised me – I thought you were going to be a lot worse."

Guhle, who picked up my voice recorder after the practice and did a mock interview with me at the bench, offered some words of encouragement to take back to the Rusty Nuts.

"You're a lot better skater than I expected, honestly you are," said Guhle. "You were shooting pretty good, scored a few times on Nick – that's impressive."

Said defenceman Shane Collins: "You weren't as bad as I thought – you definitely didn't quite fit in, but you held up pretty good. It's a pretty fast game out there."

That it is. After stepping outside my comfort zone to try to keep up with those young punks, I'm back where I belong in the pressbox, where I know you're supposed to remain impartial to either team. But it's safe to say, now that I've shared the same ice with a team that has a realistic shot at reaching the Memorial Cup this spring, my journalistic integrity is going to be put to the test.

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