

In a rebuilding year, **Shane Mills** argues, the *Cougars* did pretty well.

Time to look at the offence

As the sun sets on another season of Cougar hockey, some points to consider, ruminate on or otherwise just completely ignore.

□ One of the toughest parts about junior hockey is the realization that some players will never reach such heights again, where 5,000 people scream their name and the energy in the building is all directed towards them. Taking it hardest, always, are the 20-year-olds, who have exhausted their junior eligibility. Christian Chartier will be missed, but the rock-solid defenceman has a career in the game he loves. Brett Allan was a decent person, but never caught the imagination of the town. However, Berkeley Buchko came here in the fall and became a great player for the Cats. But more than that, his enthusiasm for the game and for life. It was an emotional Buchko that conducted post-series interviews, showing great class in taking blame for the loss and giving us all a reminder that no matter how much we think we live or die with the team it can't compare to the emotional invest-



Shane Mills

ment of the players.

□ There are 19 players who are eligible to return next season, which might lead one to think the Cats are in good shape for the future. But there are a few holes.

Don't expect David Koci back, as the big defenceman proved to be more of a liability than an asset most of the time. The Cats are still in good stead on the blue-line, as Dan Hamhuis will be back to anchor the defence. Joining him will be Scott Lynch and Gary Gladue who were starting to turn promise into reality by the end of the year.

Justin Cox, however, might not be back. The 19-year-old captain of the Cats has a deal with Dallas and they may ship him to the minors. If that happens, look for Hamhuis to wear the 'C' on his sweater.

□ The biggest challenge facing management over the summer is trying to find ways to score more goals. While he is a vastly improved player over last year, there is something odd about having Derek Boogaard come up with your best scoring chances.

If Cox is gone, that means three of the team's top scorers (Buchko and Chartier being the others) will disappear. That will put a heavy load on Blake Robson, Chris Fal-

loon and Jonathan Filewich to carry the team offensively.

□ And speaking of next season, will it be possible for the league to send the referees to summer school. If the pair at the Multiplex on Monday night (particularly Allan Smith) are the best we can find, the league's officiating is in big trouble.

The refs didn't cost the Cats the game, but the inability of Smith to have any sense of consistency robbed the game of some vitality. Did Derek Boogaard deserve a penalty? Yes and with his reputation he's always going to get called on it. But just before that Buchko was mugged right in front of Smith, with no call.

□ When the season starts anew, Ed Dempsey will be behind the bench. He has his critics, especially those who believe he overplays top players, but Dempsey did take the team farther than many expected - especially after the team's horrendous start.

However, don't be surprised to see Dallas Thompson move. After a few seasons as assistant coach, Thompson is ready to strike out on his own.

□ And, finally, let us hope that Rick Brodsky's scouting trip this season to Europe pays some dividends. The Cats would benefit from a high-impact import.

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Coach finds some positives as year ends

give final interviews and to hold on to the memory of that last game.

The Cats dragged their best-of-seven series against the Winter Hawks to a sixth game. Although Chartier says he would have liked to go all the way to a game seven and beyond, he's happy with his team's and his own performance in his final WHL playoff.

"We battled hard and gave them a good run at it and we can be proud of that," he says. "We have nothing to hang our heads about."

After five years of junior hockey perhaps the hardest thing for Chartier will be adjusting to a life different from the one he's known for half a decade. Although it's almost certain his future includes hockey, very possibly at the highest professional level, there's an innocence to the junior level that Chartier says he'll miss when he steps into the big-business world of pro-hockey.

"Knowing you won't be back next year playing junior is hard. It's like they say, junior is the time of your life. I know it will be hard but hopefully I'll move forward and there are brighter things in the future," he says. "I'll be losing a lot of friends."

Chartier is the longest serving Cougar among the



Brett Allen (left) and Berkeley Buchko (right) will be looking towards the future after their last game as Cougars Monday night. JOHN MCKENZIE/FREE PRESS

three graduating 20-year-olds, which includes Brett Allan and Berkeley Buchko. The next few months will determine if he signs a contract with the Edmonton Oilers, who drafted him in 1999, or becomes a free agent. For now he plans on paying a visit to his tiny, population 400 hometown of St. Lazare, Manitoba, which

he hasn't been back to in the past two years.

While the old guard pondered their future, Cougars head coach Ed Dempsey was focusing on one of the most positive aspects of the playoff series, which speaks of a good future for the team — the young players.

"The positive is that our young guys played very well

and got a lot of valuable experience. It's tough to simulate a playoff run," says Dempsey. "You've got to look at Billy (Thompson), the play of (Scott) Lynch, (Gary) Gladue, (Dan) Baum, (Derek) Boogaard, (Devin) Wilson. I don't think there is one returning guy who didn't play well for us at some point in the playoffs or during the year."

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