

The best — from coast to coast

The Air Canada Cup draws teams from across the nation, each with their own histories and style of play — but with one common goal.

Beardy's Blackhawks - West

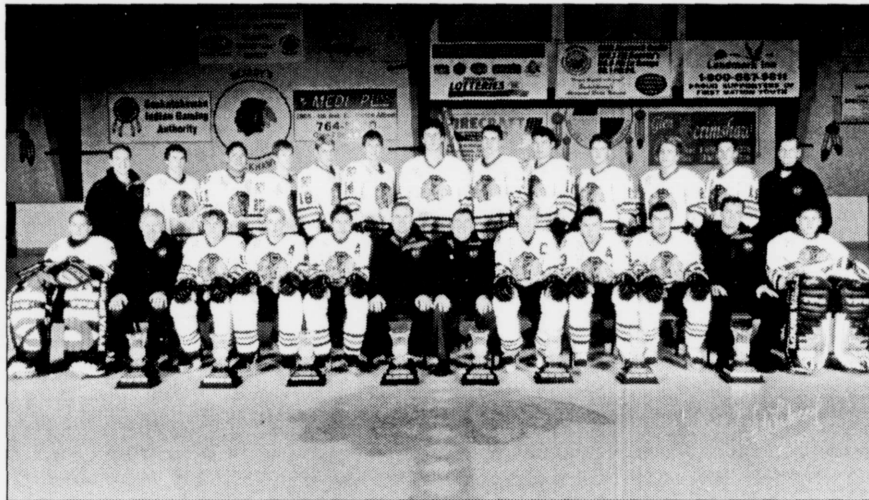
Dale Grayson knows rural Saskatchewan hockey teams have a reputation for being big, aggressively physical players. The Beardy's Blackhawks coach also knows that underestimating his team's skill and finesse has been the downfall of teams before and may be the downfall of at least one more this week during the Air Canada Cup.

"We've had a reputation in the past as a strong defensive team, but in the past two years we've led the Saskatchewan league in goals against," says Grayson.

This week doesn't just represent the first time the six-year-old team has competed in the national midget tournament — for many it will be the first time they've travelled more than one province over to play hockey.

"After we won the Western Regionals I asked how many of the kids had ever been on an airplane before," says Grayson. "Only five put up their hands."

Beardy's is a native reservation with a population of around 800. The next closest town is five miles away and the closest centre of any size is half a day's drive. As of the middle of April the team has had to drive an hour and a half to Saskatoon for every practice because the only rink in Beardy's is closed for the summer. Yet this remote town has put together one of the most impressive rosters in AAA midget hockey in the country. Five years ago the 'Hawks finished their season with two wins and 44 losses. This season they took gold in the Prince Albert Ice Mania tournament, came fourth in the Calgary Mac's International tourney after losing to Switzerland and finished with a 26-13-5 record in the regular season. They then battled through the playoffs with a 9-2 record, sweeping the Saskatoon Contacts in



Team West, Beardy's Blackhawks, will be the first team Prince George faces in the Cup.

their playoff series. This comes the season after the Contacts did the exact same thing to the Blackhawks, sweeping them four straight for the Western Regionals.

The success of Beardy's hasn't gone unnoticed either. Fully

14 of the team's 19 players are listed by Western Hockey League teams and 17 are listed by the Saskatchewan Junior Hockey League. Behind the blue line the team is very strong, with

Jonathan Krahn, the Saskatchewan midget AAA goaltender of the year between the pipes. On defence they have Justin Cruse, Saskatchewan midget league all-star, and Brent Gardipy, Western Regional top defenceman. Their offence is spearheaded by Gary Houseman, the Western Regional top forward and top scorer.

In fact the only thing that catches the Blackhawks off-guard will likely come off-ice instead of on. The team's first

experience with the bright lights of the media came during their first practice in Saskatoon last week when television, radio and print media descended on the Western champs.

"They know that the important part is to play the game," says Grayson. "I've told the players that all this other stuff is what happens when you play well. It's been a terrific year and they've got a lot of pride in what they've accomplished."

Beardy's is the first team the host Coast Inn of the North Cougars will play. The puck drops April 23 at 8 p.m.

Toronto Young Nationals - Central

Balance is why the Nationals have won every major tournament they've competed in this season, it's why they had an almost perfect 31-1-4 league season and why coach James Wilson is confident they will be a force to reckon with at the Air Canada Cup.

The Nats kicked off the year by winning Sudbury's Big

Nickel tournament and didn't look back, winning the Toronto Showcase and then the Toronto City League's Carnation Cup.

"The thing that got us those results was our balance and our team defence," says Wilson. "Kids that age sometimes forget they're responsible for both ends of the ice. We've done everything we can to make them aware of that responsibility."

The numbers bear Wilson out. The Nationals allowed only 36 goals in 100 games thanks to the team's defensive efforts and the goaltending of Zack Brown and Brendan Coates, who have shared equal time in net this season and average a 2.1 goals against average between them. Brown is a draft pick for the Ontario Hockey League's North Bay team and defenceman Jamie Coghlan is listed by the OHL's London Knights.

The depth extends from defence to offence as well. Although centre Bryant Wilson is far and away the squad's major offensive threat with 148 points in 77 games, five out of the remaining 10 forwards have

each notched over 30 goals, giving Wilson several strong lines at any one time on the ice. "We've sought throughout the years to put out three five-man units, each capable at both ends of the ice," he says. "I think some teams can't do that, they can't put out three good five-man lines without a significant drop-off from the first to the third."

The Nationals aren't an especially large or physical team. Every one of their centres come in under six feet tall. But brute strength is sacrificed in favour of speed and skill, a combination that's served the team well in the Toronto City League, but hasn't been tested yet against national competition.

Dartmouth Subways - Atlantic

There's a map tacked to the wall of the home rink dressing room of the Dartmouth Subways midgets. It's a map of Canada, with tournament locations indicated with stickers. First there's the sticker right on their home province, representing the local competitions, then a sticker in Thunder Bay, Ontario, for the silver medal they won in the Thunder Bay Kings Tourney. There are stickers on Hull, Moncton and Drummondville. And as of April 23, there will be a sticker all the way across the map, right on Prince George, BC.

"We have had a theme with our team throughout the season," says Subways coach Brad Crossley. "And that was to go coast to coast. So now we've finally done it."

The Subways ran roughshod over the seven other teams competing in the Nova Scotia midget league, with a 30-4-1 record during the season. They also notched tournament wins in the preseason icebreaker and Moncton tourney. After winning their league playoffs with a 9-2 record they swept the Atlantic Championships in five straight games

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