

Win streak ends, but Whalers recover nicely

This has to rate as one of the best weekends of the season for the Plymouth Whalers.

Yes, their win streak was snapped at 17 on Friday night when they let a 3-1 lead get away in a 5-3 loss at Guelph. It was an experience the Whalers hadn't suffered since Jan. 29.

An emotional downturn was certainly possible, particularly since they had games on Saturday and Sunday, too, and against opponents with better records than Guelph.

But the Whalers rebounded admirably, taking command against the Windsor Spitfires Saturday in a 5-1 victory at Compuware Arena and then following it with a hard-fought, come-from-behind 3-2 triumph at Sarnia Sunday.

The two Whaler wins clinched their second-straight Ontario Hockey League regular-season title. Plymouth improved to 46-18-4 (95 points), four more than both the Barrie Colts (who have one game remaining) and the Ottawa 67s (who have finished

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this season).

The Spitfires, who started the season so well, were no match for the Whalers Saturday. Following a scoreless first period, Plymouth scored three times in the second, with Justin Williams, Stephen Weiss and Tomas Kurka getting goals. Williams' marker was short-handed, while Kurka scored on the power play.

Kurka's second power-play goal of the game at the 7:51 mark of the final period put Plymouth ahead 4-0. Windsor ruined Rob Zepp's shutout when Frank Sinacori scored with 2:43 remaining. Steven Morris got the Whalers' final marker with 41 seconds left.

Weiss and Shaun Fisher each had two assists in the game and Kurka had one. Zepp stopped 20 shots while his Windsor counterpart, Ryan Aschaber, had 38 saves.

Windsor was 34-31-2 through

Sunday.

Sunday's game at Sarnia was a bigger test for the Whalers. The Sting had been playing well coming into the weekend, and it was Plymouth's third game in as many days.

Sarnia struck first, getting two power-play goals in the first period from Alexander Buturlin and Maxim Rybin. They were sandwiched around a power-play marker by the Whalers' Williams (his team-leading 37th of the season), with assists by Damian Surma and Fisher.

The Sting's 2-1 lead stood until the final period. With 6:57 elapsed, Surma knotted it at 2-1 all with his 34th goal of the year; Williams assisted.

Fisher then got the game-winner, a power-play goal with 6:11 left in the game. It was the 17th goal of the season for Plymouth's top defenseman.

Zepp had 33 saves in pushing his record for the season to 36-

11-3. Greg Hewitt made 26 stops for the Sting.

The Whalers' final regular-season game is at London Friday. They open the OHL playoffs as the No. 1 seed, at home Saturday, against either Guelph, Brampton or Kitchener.

Ambassador is top goalie

Craig Kowalski of the Compuware Ambassadors was named the North American Hockey League's goalie of the week for the second time this season. Kowalski, who ranks third in the league in goals-against average (2.44), allowed four goals in two games while making 65 saves, a .942 save

percentage.

The Ambassadors maintained their hold on first place in the NAHL's East Division, beating the Grand Rapids Rockets 3-1 Friday at Compuware. Kowalski made 35 stops in the victory, with Steve Swistak, Andy Greene and Mark Norrington scoring goals.

On Sunday, the Soo Kewadin Casino Indians got three first-period goals and hung on to beat Compuware, 3-2 at Compuware. Bo Cheesman scored twice for the Indians, who moved to within six points of the division leaders. The Ambassadors got goals from Ryan Connelly and Mark Cannon.

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defenseman, was one.

"Last year," DeBoer explained, "we had a group of superstar players, then things dropped off a bit. This year we're more balanced."

"I think (Fisher) got overshadowed last year by those guys. Now he's kind of stepped into his own."

"A lot of guys had to step up, and they did."

Fisher was obscured by Marra and Nikos Tselios, two of the OHL's best defensemen, last season. He isn't anymore; Fisher has 17 goals and 49 assists (66 points) in 59 games, with a plus-38 rating. He has become one of the most productive defensemen in the OHL.

But others have filled the void created by the loss of so many stars. Justin Williams leads the Whalers in scoring with 37 goals and 46 assists (83 points); next best is Damian Surma with 34 goals and 44 assists (78 points).

The rookies who have made the biggest impact are Stephen Weiss, the Whalers' first-round pick in '99, with 24 goals and 41 assists (65 points); Tomas Kurka, who has 36 goals and 28 assists (64 points); and Steven Morris, with 13 goals and 18 assists (31 points).

The Whalers don't score as many goals as last season, but the defense, led by Fisher and goalie Zepp, has helped overcome that. For the second-straight year Plymouth will lead the OHL in goals surrendered (167, with one game left); Zepp, through last weekend, was 36-11-3 in goal with a .903 save percentage and a 2.38 goals-against average, with three shutouts.

"We don't score as many goals as last year, so we've had to rely on our defense," said DeBoer.

It's all very nice, sure. DeBoer admits it, but he knows there's another step to take, especially after last year's disappointment.

"We're hoping the playoffs are more productive," said DeBoer. "One thing we've learned is that the regular season doesn't mean very much. Last year taught us that."

It also taught DeBoer not to focus too heavily on what the opponent does. Anyway, going into Friday's final regular-season

games, the Whalers could be facing Kitchener, Brampton or Guelph on Saturday.

"They're all tough teams," said DeBoer. "Any of the three will be a difficult opponent. In the first round, we're going to concentrate on what we're going to do and just stick to the formula that got us here."

"It's really impossible to pre-

pare for three teams anyway."

That 17-game win streak showed DeBoer that, if the Whalers "play our game and not do anything differently, we'll do right."

That's the plan, at any rate. But if any team has gone well beyond the plan set for it at the beginning of the season, it's the Whalers.

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