

Whalers advance to Western Conference finals

In the end, the Plymouth Whalers proved too fast and too deep for the Windsor Spitfires.

The Whalers clinched the best-of-seven-series with a 4-1 triumph Saturday in front of 2,109 fans at Compuware Arena. It was their fourth win in five games against the Spits and their eighth in their last nine playoff games.

Plymouth now advances to the Ontario Hockey League Western Conference finals against the winner of the Erie/Sault Ste. Marie series; through Tuesday, the series was even at three-games apiece.

The Whalers open the conference finals at home at 7:30 p.m. Saturday.

- Goals by Darnan Surma and Justin Williams got the Whalers started Saturday against Windsor. Surma scored his fifth playoff goal 8:01 into the opening period, with assists going to Tomas Kurka and Jared Newman.
- Williams made it 2-0 at 10:42 with his ninth goal of the playoffs, assisted by Newman and

HOCKEY

Libor Ustrnul. The Spits closed the gap to a single goal with a power-play marker by Vince Grant with 6:39 left.

But that was all Windsor could manage against Plymouth and goalie Rob Zepp. The Whalers had a commanding 38-21 shot advantage.

Randy Fitzgerald made it 3-1 with a power-play goal — scored at 2:55 of the second period. Shaun Fisher and Williams assisted. Kurka's empty net goal with 1:14 left in the game finished the scoring.

Zepp stopped 20 of the 21 shots he faced. Mike Loughton had 35 saves for Windsor.

Fitzgerald honored

Randy Fitzgerald, a left-winger for the Plymouth Whalers, was named OHL player of the week for the period ending April 16 after scoring four goals in four games to help the Whalers eliminate the Windsor

Spitfires from the OHL playoffs in five games.

Fitzgerald, who stands 5-foot-11 and weighs 174, has eight goals and four assists (12 points) in the playoffs, which ranks eighth in OHL playoff scoring. For the regular season, the team captain had 18 goals and 24 assists (42 points).

Earlier Monday, Fitzgerald was named the hardest worker and best defensive forward in the OHL's Western Conference in a coach's poll.

Ambassadors ousted

The Danville Wings defeated the defending North American Hockey League and national champion Compuware Ambassadors in two games in their best-of-three NAHL semifinal series last weekend at Compuware Arena.

Danville won both games by a 3-2 score. On Friday, Dan Knapp scored twice for the Ambassadors in the third period to give them a 2-1 lead, but the Wings came back with two goals of their own, including the game-

winner with 3:27 remaining from Adam Wallace, his second of the contest.

On Saturday, Ambrose Tappe scored the game-winner 10:58 into overtime to clinch the series

triumph for the Wings. Compuware, winner of the last two NAHL titles, had a 2-0 lead in the first period on goals by Josh Griffith and Alex Sawruk.

Danville trimmed it to one on

a first-period goal by Shane Saum, then tied it early in the third period on a goal by Todd Grant. Craig Kowalski had 70 saves in goal in his last two games for the Ambassadors.

Rockers to play games at Compuware Arena

By C.J. RISK
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It was the logical move to make. So the Detroit Rockers did it, agreeing to play 16 of their 22 regular-season home indoor soccer games next season at Compuware Arena. The Rockers have signed a three-year lease.

"It's a good fit for us," said Rockers' general manager and part-owner Dave Woodrow. "I think it's going to work out well."

Mike Vellucci, building supervisor for Compuware Arena, agreed. "They went out to the Palace (of Auburn Hills), and that was too big," he said. "This is a more intimate facility for them, with 4,600 seats."

It does, indeed, seem the right place for soccer. Compuware sits in the middle of the state's biggest soccer pocket, with Plymouth, Canton, Livonia, Farmington, Northville, Novi and Brighton all within a 20-minute drive. In the last decade, most of the state's best prep soccer teams have come from these areas.

The move began to take shape when Mike Illitch, owner of the Detroit Red Wings and Detroit Tigers, decided to sell the Rockers last year. That forced the team to leave Cobo Arena for the Palace.

But that proved too big a forum for this still-growing sport. "Our product is better suited to a smaller arena," said Woodrow.

Enter Compuware. According to Woodrow, the Rockers' owners were "approached by three other arenas" in the area, but settled on Compuware.

"There were two reasons," he said. "The greater Canton-Plymouth-Livonia area is much more conducive to our demo-

graphics."

Also, Compuware could guarantee Friday-Saturday-Sunday playing dates. The Rockers will still play six home games at the Palace.

The relocation has certainly been greeted with enthusiasm. According to Woodrow, season ticket sales have "already exceeded last year."

One good reason for that are prices. "The overall ticket prices will go down, from \$16 to \$14," said Woodrow. Other special events, like Sunday Brunch with the Rockers — a package featuring a family brunch with the team at Gino's (located in the arena) with tickets to the ensuing game — are in the works.

The Rockers will also continue to do their camps in the area. "They do a lot of their camps out here already," said Vellucci. "I think it'll be a positive for the community."

As for the changes that need to be made to handle the new tenant, Vellucci isn't overly concerned. A wooden platform will be placed over the ice surface and a carpet will be laid on top of that for the Rockers.

The Rockers' team offices will remain in Walled Lake and no change in the team name is foreseen, but team uniforms will be updated.


"The Whalers get preference, obviously," Vellucci said. "But with the dates, it should be no problem."

A few arena alterations are necessary, he added. For Rockers games, seats that will extend into the stands must be placed behind each goal. The Whalers' scoreboard, which could present an obstacle for Rockers' goal kicks, will remain as is.

The owner of the Whalers, Compuware Arena and the NHL's Nashville Predators is Peter Karmanos.

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