

Whalers set to begin new era with new coach, lineup

BY C.J. RISAK
STAFF WRITER
cjrisak@pbh.homecomm.net

HOCKEY

The start of the Ontario Hockey League initially was pushed up two weeks, to mid-September. Now, due to the tragic events of the week, it's been delayed for a few days. The Plymouth Whalers' opener scheduled for today in Windsor was cancelled and rescheduled for 6 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 30, in Windsor.

The home opener, 7:30 p.m. Saturday against Erie, is still on.

The delay will probably be beneficial for the Whalers, who could start the season with a very new lineup — not the way Mike Vellucci, in his first year coaching the Whalers, would like to start.

"It will take us a while to assemble this team," Vellucci, who succeeds Pete DeBoer, said. "We probably won't know until the day before the home opener (who will be on the roster)."

That's because a dozen Whalers were either drafted by NHL teams or invited to their tryout camps. As of Wednesday, seven of those players were still attending those camps, leaving their future with the Whalers very much in doubt.

Too bad, considering the Whalers have reached the OHL finals the past two years. Last season they had the second-best regular-season record in the league at 43-16-5.

Matching that won't be easy. Among the missing is Stephen Weiss, Plymouth's top scorer last season with 40 goals and 47 assists (87 points, excluding the playoffs). Weiss was drafted fourth in last spring's NHL Entry Draft.

"I don't know what to expect," Weiss said prior to leaving for the two-week camp. "The main camp should be fun."

"Just getting selected fourth was quite a relief. It really was something special, something you never forget."

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"The first year, especially," he said of his two years in Plymouth. "We weren't even supposed to get to the playoffs."

Also missing from last season's team are Preston Mizzi, 27 goals, 33 assists, and Stacey Britstone, 24 goals, 27 assists, both over-age players last year; forwards Chad Wiseman (San Jose), who had 28 goals and 45 assists last season; Damian Surma (Carolina), 26 goals and 33 assists; Chad LaRose (Detroit), who had 18 goals and seven assists; Tomas Kurka (Carolina), who netted 15 goals and 29 assists; Karl Stewart (Atlanta), seven goals and 14 assists; defenseman Libor Ustrup (Atlanta), three goals and 13 assists; and goalie Rob Zupp (Carolina), who had a 34-18-3 record, a 2.26 goals-against average.

Twisters whip Grizzlies, 35-0

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Chuck Pettipas (Livonia) hit 115 fives extra point attempts.

The Twisters piled up 438 total yards, while Elswick was 5-7 for 164.

The Grizzlies' only threat came late in the second quarter when they reached the 9 after the Twisters were penalized 30 yards for protecting a call.

Three plays later, the Grizzlies were a yard further away and attempted a field goal, which was blocked by linebacker Bob Pensari (Canton).

Among the leading returnees is defenseman James Wisniewski, from Canton. Wisniewski was the Whalers' first draft choice in 2000, and he made his presence known last season with a solid first season on the blue line. The 5-foot-11, 190-pounder finished with six goals and 23 assists. He won't be eligible for the NHL draft next year.

Which pretty much describes Plymouth's outlook. Still, a few of the other players who attended NHL camps have returned, bolstering the Whalers' hopes.

Jarrett, drafted by Columbus in the fifth round, led Whaler defensemen in scoring with 12 goals and 36 assists.

Other top returnees are forward Kris Vernarsky (14 goals, 21 assists), a second-round pick by Toronto; Greg Campbell (two goals, 12 assists); Rob McBride (18 goals, 17 assists); and overager George Nied (10 goals, 11 assists), a forgotten No. 15er (four goals, eight assists), a fifth-round pick of Phoenix; Andre Robichaud (one goal, 12 assists),

who was invited to Carolina's camp; and Jared Newman (four assists), a fourth-round choice of Carolina who has an injured shoulder; and goalie Paul Drew (9-1-1 record, 2.42 goals-against average, .901 save percentage).

All of which means Vellucci will have to rely on his newcomers. The notable新人 are 2001 first-round pick John Mitchell, a center; 2001 third-round pick Tim Sestito, a left wing; 2001 import draft Jonest Fiedler, a left wing from the

Czech Republic; and 2000 seventh-round pick Brent Mahon, a center.

With such a changeover, what can one expect from the Whalers?

"Surprise. The unexpected," Vellucci signed a lot of good people," said Vellucci. "I imagine Windsor should be very tough. They should be our biggest rival. It all just depends on who comes back."

And in the Whalers' case, when.

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