

Oilers capture MVCHA playoff series with Granite City

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
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GRANITE CITY – Conditions at Granite City's Wilson Park Ice Rink Monday night were near-perfect for a hockey game. The rink, even though it has a roof over the rink, is essentially an open-air rink, and Monday's cold temperatures and snow flurries made the scene resemble those that could be found in many Canadian communities where hockey's grassroots can be found.

The **Warriors** entered Monday's game facing elimination from the Mississippi Valley Club Hockey Association's Class 1A playoffs having dropped a 4-0 decision to **East Alton-Wood River** last Thursday in the playoff opener for both teams. The Oilers, however, wanted to close out the series to move on to the Class 1A semifinals against top-seeded Bethalto, which gets under way next week.

While the Oilers got out to a bit of a slow start, they got untracked in the second period and went on to record a 7-1 win over the Warriors to move on in the postseason tournament, sweeping the best-of-three set 2-0.

“I was proud of the guys,” said **Oiler coach John Helmkamp**. “Most importantly, because Granite came out play in the first (period) and we weren't playing as well as we could and we didn't panic when we went down 1-0.

“That's a sign of a good team that's got good character; they're going to just keep playing their game and go through it. I was happy about the second period especially (where the Oilers scored four times to take a 4-1 lead into the second intermission to put themselves in a position to advance). We turned it around in the second and made a nice effort; we were constant pressuring them in their own zone.”

The Warriors had taken the lead with 6:18 left in the first period on a goal from Riley Brown with assists going to Pavol Hutchins and Jake Freivogel. “I think we played really well in the first period and I think when we first started getting worn down towards the later part of the second period and that's when it hit us,” said **Warrior coach Frank Parker**. “I think we did really well tonight.”

Parker praised his team for their effort despite facing elimination Monday and throughout the season. “I wouldn't trade any of these kids for a million dollars,” Parker said. “These kids are all great young men and it's a pleasure coaching them. We've got some really good kids coming up and I'm looking forward in about two years to put a run on some folks and I think we're on the upturn.”

The Oilers managed to get themselves untracked quickly in the second period, tying the game just 2:27 into the period when Nolan Royse got a pass from Tyson Knight and scored to tie the game, then Royse gave EAWR the lead with 9:56 left when Royse scored again off helpers from Bryce Bazzell and Blake Weishaupt.

Weishaupt extended the lead to 3-1 when he scored from assists from Bazzell and Jacob Disher; then, on a late-period power play, Tyler McHatton put EAWR up 4-1 off a Cole Ford assist. Weishaupt then scored twice early in the third period with Ford and Bazzell assisting on the first goal then McHatton and Jacob Vassoss getting assists on the goal that made it 6-1. The final Oiler goal came with 4:33 to go when McHatton connected from a Royse assist to close out the scoring and the series.

Blake Stone got the win in goal for the Oilers, continuing his remarkable comeback from a broken leg he suffered during the football season that kept him off the ice most of the year for the Oilers. Grant Jackson was between the pipes for the Warriors on the night.

The Oiler-Eagle best-of-three Class 1A semifinal set begins at 7:15 p.m. Feb. 15 at East Alton Ice Arena, with Game 2 set for 6:50 p.m. Feb. 16 at Wilson Park and a third game (if needed) set for 7:15 p.m. Feb. 18 at East Alton. The winner of that series will advance to the best-of-three MVCHA Class 1A championship series beginning Feb. 22.

