

East Alton-Wood River slips past Jerseyville in hockey playoffs

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
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EAST ALTON – With just eight skaters and two goaltenders, Jerseyville could have easily folded up their tents and went home when they fell behind 4-1 to East Alton-Wood River in the second game of their best-of-three Mississippi Valley Club Hockey Association Class 1A West Division semifinal series Thursday night at East Alton Ice Arena.

The Panthers refused to do so.

Instead, they got a pair of goals from Joe Watson down the stretch to forge a 4-4 tie, and a shootout seemed imminent.

Unfortunately for Jerseyville, the Oilers' Cole Ford had other ideas as he let loose a shot that eluded a screened Panther goalie Gage Wendel with 39.3 seconds to go to give the Oilers a 5-4 win and a two-game sweep of the series.

EAWR will take on Bethalto in a best-of-three set for the division crown and a berth in the 1A final starting Tuesday night.

Despite having to run a short bench compared to the Oilers, Panther coach John Criswell was proud of his side. "We never gave up," Criswell said. "We played our hearts out. I told the kids going into the third that they needed to play as if this was the last 13 minutes of their careers, and they did everything we could have asked of them.

Like Game 1 Tuesday night, Wendel was fabulous between the pipes, again standing on his head to make some crucial saves when the Panthers needed them. "Every goal they got, they had to work for," Criswell said. "Gage is just an amazing goaltender. He made the all-star team as a freshman and he's just done a fantastic job"

Oiler coach John Helmkamp knew as well that Jerseyville wasn't going to go away. "We've played them four times, and every time, they played great," Helmkamp said. "Playing with a two-goal lead can be hard, and (Jerseyville) kept coming after us. Some of our gaps on defense were a bit too deep, and it gave them some room. They were able to finish off the chances they had, but we stayed with our game plan."

Play started off cautiously, with neither team wanting to give up the first goal. The Oilers had the better of the play, keeping the puck in the Panther end, but couldn't find the range thanks to some outstanding saves by Wendel. It took 9:44 before the Oilers finally solved Wendel when Jacob Vassos fired home a rebound off a goal-mouth scramble, with Tyson Knight and Brett Gaines assisting, to give EAWR a 1-0 lead.

Thirteen seconds later, the Oilers went out to a 2-0 lead when Alec Revelle found Seth Chester deep in the zone and got the puck to him, with Chester beating Wendel cleanly. It took the Panthers just 38 seconds to respond, though, when Jarrick Lumma beat Tyler Hamby to the short side at 10:35 to cut the lead to 2-1 through one period, with assists going to Neal Currie and Watson.

Ford restored the Oilers' two-goal lead on an unassisted goal just 1:09 into the second period, and Chester pushed the lead to 4-1 with assists from Gaines and Revelle at 6:47 of the second. Back came the Panthers as Lumma, with an assist to Currie, cut the lead to 4-2 at 9:30 of the session.

That's where it stood most of the period until Watson went to work, getting feeds from Lumma and Currie to make it a 4-3 game at 7:44 of the third before seemingly forcing a shootout at 10:11 when Watson teamed up with Lumma and Currie again to draw things level at 4-4.

The Oilers seeming had scored a go-ahead goal with 1:02 left when the puck went in during a goal-mouth scramble, but after discussing the matter, the officials ruled that Wendel had been pushed into the net with possession of the puck by an Oiler player and disallowed the goal.

All that did was delay Ford's heroics, when he took the puck from passes from Revelle and Chester and fired from the right point. Another Oiler set up a screen in front of Wendel and the puck went in. Jerseyville pulled Wendel after getting the puck into the Oiler zone and nearly scored in the dying seconds, but the Oiler defense was up to the task.

EAWR outshot Jerseyville 35-19, with Wendel making 30 saves and Hamby 15. Both teams were 0-for-1 on the power play.

Game 1 of the Oilers-Eagles series is set for 8:45 p.m. Tuesday night at East Alton Ice Arena. Game 2 will be played at 7:15 p.m. Feb. 19, with a third game if needed at 8:45 p.m. Feb. 23. The winner takes the East Division champion in the 1A Final; the schedule for that series has yet to be determined.