

SPORTS

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EMAIL: sports@ok.bc.ca

COLLEGE HOCKEY

Crusaders embark on big homestand

By LARRY FISHER
The Daily Courier

The Okanagan Crusaders are coming off their biggest win of the season. The Selkirk Saints are coming off their first win of the campaign.

Both riding highs, something has to give when the two teams meet for the first time in a two-game set this weekend. The expansion Crusaders (3-6-1), sitting sixth in the seven-team B.C. Intercollegiate Hockey League, host the last-place Saints (1-8-1) tonight (Winfield Arena, 9:10 p.m.) and Saturday (Rutland Arena, 9:30 p.m.).

"This weekend is really important for us," said Crusaders president-player Kelly Loudoun, whose squad returns to action after a lengthy layoff, having earned a 4-3 road win over third-place University of the Fraser Valley (4-4-0) in their last contest on Nov. 1.

"If we get four points, it should put us in a playoff position. Even though we're still early in the season, we feel like we've improved a lot and we showed that when we beat UFV. We've beat (UFV) twice now, and we feel like we have a lot of wins ahead of us."

That said, the Crusaders aren't getting ahead of themselves by looking past the Saints. Selkirk took three of four points from fourth-place University of Victoria (3-3-2) last weekend in Castlegar, posting their first victory, 6-5, then tying 7-7.

"It looks like they're not the same team they were the weekend before," Loudoun said of the Saints, who were previously winless, including 7-2 and 4-2 losses at Victoria. "You can't underestimate anybody. Every team in the league can beat any other team, and that's what has been happening.

"The way we see it, every game in this league is a tough game. It doesn't matter who we're playing, we still gotta play the same hockey."

Being their inaugural season, Loudoun, vice-president Kolby Barnstable and the coaching staff have been busy behind the scenes, tying together loose ends and securing an affiliation with Okanagan College. With those distractions now taken care of for the most part, Loudoun said their focus has shifted back to the on-ice product.

"Any time you're an expansion organization, there's a lot going on and it's not all about putting a team on the ice," he said. "There's different things going on and it takes some time to sort all that out. But now we're in a place where we feel pretty comfortable."



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"We're ready to start playing some good hockey and hopefully get some points here, and make playoffs at the end of the day," Loudoun continued.

The top four teams qualify for BCIHL playoffs, along with host

Trinity Western University.

This weekend will go a long way in determining whether the Crusaders make the grade.

"We had a bit of a slow start, but we know what we're capable of," Loudoun said. "We're looking forward to getting back out there. We're hoping to get our first four-point weekend here, and get back to almost .500."