

# Lakers looking to build on solid first half

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By Dan Falloon, Staff writer

The Fort Frances Lakers certainly conquered the first half of the SIJHL season—emerging atop the six-team loop at the midway point. Granted, the expansion Wisconsin Wilderness are just a point behind with two games in hand, but the local Junior ‘A’ squad still is a force to be reckoned with, posting a 19-8-1 record through its first 28 games.

Over that span, the Lakers enjoyed a winning streak of six games to go along with their current four-gamer, and haven’t suffered anything worse than a two-game losing skid.

The Lakers hit the halfway mark with 6-2 win over the Thunder Bay North Stars here Saturday after having downed the host Sioux Lookout Flyers 6-3 the night before.

The 19 wins so far clearly are a milestone for a team that recorded only 14 victories all of last season.

“Definitely we’re far ahead of where I thought we would be,” reasoned head coach Wayne Strachan.

“To have 19 wins at this point, and by all means I know the season isn’t over, but we’ve put ourselves in a pretty good place to go through the

second half,” he remarked.

“They’ve come back hungry and motivated in the right direction.

“Overall, I think we’ve achieved a lot as a team, grown a lot as a team,” Strachan added.

Strachan said he’s made relatively few in-season changes, noting the current roster is fairly similar to the opening day one.

In-season acquisitions Brad Bienvenu and Rysin Allison were released last week while forward Mike Jourdain was swapped to Duluth for ex-Fort Frances Jr. Sabre Dan Smith.

Strachan said the play of both the power play and penalty kill units has been a surprise for him this year.

The Lakers’ power play leads the SIJHL with better than a 29 percent efficiency (after they were fourth with a 14.39 percent mark last season) while their top-rated penalty kill is up to 86.36 percent after a last-place 75.09 percent showing last year.

“I’m a coach that’s always prided myself and my teams on our special teams,” stressed Strachan.

“That’s been our key to winning games, and to this point, that’s been my No. 1 surprise.”

The Lakers also have been in the mix among the country’s top teams so far this season, and this week was no different—landing at No. 19 in the CJHL’s top 20 rankings.

However, after a dip in play when the Lakers first cracked the national rankings, captain Tyler Stevenson noted the team’s not interested in where they are at this point.

“Nothing’s won yet,” he stressed. “The success we’ve had is great, it’s a lot of fun, but [we] don’t want to win just now.

“We want to be winning in April and May when it counts.”

The national Junior 'A' championship—the RBC Cup—is slated for May in Camrose, Alta.

For Stevenson, his biggest surprise is how the team is getting contributions from all four lines, which is especially important now that his own torrid scoring pace has cooled slightly.

“We’re deep, that’s the big thing,” he remarked. “We know it’s only going to get tougher as the year goes, but so far, so good.

“Every line is contributing one way or another.

“We’ve got a lot of guys that can play—and they’re showing it,” he added.

The Lakers got on the scoreboard first against the host Flyers on Friday night thanks to Blake Boaz’s fourth of the year at 5:08.

The Flyers showed some gusto, however, getting a power-play goal from Darnell Ferland and a short-handed marker by Brendan Wertanen 3:17 apart midway through the first frame to grab the lead.

Fort Frances charged back in the second when Byron Katapaytuk tallied just 58 seconds in before Morgan McNeill netted his first of the year at 2:34.

The Lakers then iced the win in the third, outshooting their hosts 24-3 over the final 20 minutes.

Marty McFadden got things started, notching his third on the power play at 5:44.

Katapaytuk then scored power-play goals at 9:54 and 19:26 as the Lakers went four-for-seven with the man advantage.

Wertanen had another short-handed goal sandwiched in between at 18:19 to give Flyers’ fans something to cheer about.

Lakers’ starting goalie Jameson Shortreed saved nine-of-11 before giving way to Tyler Ampe after the second Flyer goal.

Ampe ended up with 22 saves on the night while Sioux Lookout goalie Jesse Wilkins turned aside 47 shots in the losing cause.

Then at home to Thunder Bay on Saturday, both the Lakers’ power play and Katapaytuk remained sizzling—combining for the team’s first goal as Katapaytuk buried a Jace Baldwin rebound at 9:10 of the first.

Thunder Bay replied late in the stanza as Kyle Bruekelman dialed home a goal just 10 seconds into a North Stars' five-on-three, wisting one under Ampe's glove.

But Fort Frances regained the lead at 11:20 of the second when Ryan Wildman dug the puck out of a scrum and lifted one over goalie Guillaume Piche for his seventh of the season.

The Lakers made it 3-1 at 17:59 when Connor Hady's power-play rocket found its way through traffic and into the net for his third.

Fort Frances put the nail in the coffin early in the third as Stevenson notched his 26th after stickhandling his way out of the corner and putting a wrister past Piche at 5:44.

The goal was Stevenson's 17th power-play tally.

Newcomer Dan Smith came through with the Lakers' final man-advantage score of the night, taking a Hady pass at 9:13 before turning and firing to beat Piche blocker side.

The goal was the second of the year—and first as a Laker—for the former Jr. Sabre.

Thunder Bay cut the lead to 5-2 when Mitch Marostica notched one at 12:35 that was similar to Bruekelman's earlier goal, although this one came after a five-on-three had just expired.

Katapaytuk rounded out the scoring with his 14th of the year—performing a spin-a-rama in front of Piche and depositing the puck just 22 seconds after Thunder Bay's goal.

Ampe blocked 35 shots in all while Piche turned aside 29.

Katapaytuk has been on fire lately, registering 13 points in his last four games to rocket up to third place in SIJHL scoring.

Strachan felt the power forward's re-emergence has been sparked by a challenge he set down about two weeks ago.

"I had all the guys write down their goal," Strachan recalled. "I [then] wrote them a little letter back.

"Byron's challenged him," he added. "I'm not sure if that sort of lit a fire under his butt, but he sure came up huge the last four games.

“That’s the Byron Katapaytuk we challenged him to be, and if he can keep that up, it’ll be good for our team and obviously good for him.”

Katapaytuk, who repeated at the SIJHL player-of-the-week on Monday, already has surpassed last year’s goal total by one and is just one shy of last year’s point total.

The 19-year-old Moose Factory product said Strachan’s note instructed him to be more focused before a game—a tactic that has proven successful.

“I’ve got my game back and hopefully it stays there,” enthused Katapaytuk.

“It’s just being in the right place at the right time, pretty much.”

The Lakers will look to hang on to top spot when they visit Thunder Bay for a pair of games this Friday and Saturday.

Then they’ll return home for a game against the expansion Duluth Clydesdales next Monday (Dec. 13) at 7:30 p.m. at the Ice For Kids Arena.

