

Roger Vyse (top) beats Laker goalie Matt Vinc for the game winner as teammate Jeff Shattler looks on.



CHIEFS TOP LAKERS IN MEMORABLE ONTARIO CHAMPIONSHIP

MSL Final Goes To Game 7

>> BY MIKE DAVIES PHOTOS: VINTAGE LAX

THERE IS A SAYING IN SPORTS THAT TO be the man, you have to beat the man.

Six Nations Chiefs had every right to believe they were the man after winning the 2013 Major Series Lacrosse championship and Mann Cup. But one thing they hadn't done since 1996 was beat the Peterborough Lakers in the playoffs.

The last two times the Mann Cup had been contested in Ontario the Lakers were winners. They'd laid claim to Canadian Lacrosse Association supremacy five of the past 10 years and once again Ontario was set to host the Mann Cup in 2014. The only question being who would be the host?

In 2013, the Lakers were upset by the Brooklin Redmen in MSL semifinal play thwarting an anticipated final between the Lakers and Chiefs. Brooklin fell in four straight to Six Nations who went on to beat the Victoria Shamrocks in British Columbia to claim their first Mann Cup since 1996.

In 2014, the Redmen finished atop the regular season standings with a 14-4 record drawing a semifinal rematch with the Chiefs who had an uninspiring 9-9 record. The second place Lakers finished 10-8 despite winning 13 of their 18 games on the floor. They were forfeited three of those wins, one against Brooklin, for dressing a suspended

player in their opening four games. It cost them first place and set up their semifinal against the Kitchener-Waterloo Kodiaks. The Chiefs and Lakes polished off their opponents in five games setting up a seven-game final between the league's last two champions.

To many lacrosse aficionados, the match-up featured the two best teams in the world including the professional National Lacrosse League. The NLL's past four MVP award winners dotted the lineups including the Chiefs Cody Jamieson (2014), Jeff Shattler (2011) and Lakers' Shawn Evans (2013) and John Grant Jr. (2012). The Chiefs' Colin Doyle was a 2005 MVP while Lakers' goalie Matt Vinc back-

stopped the Rochester Knighthawks to three consecutive NLL titles. No fewer than 11 Knighthawks were spread over the two rosters.

“Both teams are so strong,” said Chiefs’ coach Rich Kilgour, before the series. “There is very little to choose between them.”

He proved to be right.

Starting Game 1 before 3,000 fans at Peterborough’s Memorial Centre, the teams were deadlocked 7-7 until Chad Culp and Mark Steenhuis – the MSL regular season scoring leader and MVP – tallied 2:59 apart in the latter stages of the third period to give the home team a 9-7 win and 1-0 series lead. Vinc and Chiefs’ netminder Evan Kirk both put on a show.

“Both teams have great goaltending,” said Lakers’ coach/GM Joe Sullivan. “We got some momentum late.”

Late momentum was a key factor in Game 2 as the series switched to the Iroquois Lacrosse Arena. It was all going the visitor’s way for two periods with the Lakers up 5-3. It stayed that way until 13:24 of the third period when, almost like turning on a faucet, the Chiefs offence came to life. In 35 seconds Kasey Beirnes and Roger Vyse erased the Lakers lead and 31 seconds later Jesse Gamble put the Chiefs in front. A five-goal explosion in a 2:27 span gave Six Nations an 8-5 win and left the Lakers wondering what hit them.

“We never gave up and showed hard work pays off,” Kilgour said. “They got to believe that if they keep working hard, good things will happen.”

Six Nations rode the momentum into Game 3 firing the first four goals on the way to a 5-1 first period lead. The scrappy Lakers mounted a comeback with Stephen Hoar’s unassisted goals 1:54 into the third period tying it 5-5. After another lengthy scoring drought the Chiefs woke up with Gamble’s second of the game starting a four-goal run for the first win by a visiting team, 9-5, and a 2-1 Chiefs lead.

Things went from bad to worse for the Lakers when it was revealed Steenhuis would miss the next three games due to a pre-booked family vacation.

Game 4 started much the same as Game 3 with the Chiefs jumping on the Lakers for another 5-1 gap after 20 minutes. Again the Lakers chipped away drawing within a goal at 7-6 with three goals 1:31 apart early in the third. This time they couldn’t tie it as Craig Point ended their run and the Chiefs prevailed 9-7 for a 3-1 series stranglehold.



Cody Jamieson recorded a huge 6-point (3g,3a) night for the Chiefs.

“Both teams have had runs and we have been able to have the last one,” Kilgour said. “We are coming together at the right time.”

Like a team on a mission the Lakers roared out of the gate 24 hours later taking a 4-1 first period lead never letting the Chiefs get on a roll in a 9-6 win. Evans was a dominant force pouring in four goals and seven points.

“We needed to get off to a faster start and stuck with it,” said Evans. “We got the early lead and the defence did the rest.”

The task was still tall as the Lakers headed to Six Nations for Game 6, even taller when it was revealed Vinc would miss the game as a member of a friend’s wedding party that night. Back-up goalie Tyler Carlson was called upon to keep the Lakers’ season alive.

Those who attended Game 6 will not soon forget it. In a classic seesaw battle, Six Nations twice took one goal leads only to have the Lakers tie it. Twice Peterborough built two-goal margins with the Chiefs evening the score. Goals 35 seconds apart by Cory Vitarelli and Adam Jones put the Lakers up 8-7 until a dramatic goal by Shattler with eight seconds left forced overtime. Grant showed, at 39, he still has magic in his stick with two goals in the 10-minute extra frame as the Lakers staved off elimination, 10-9, in enemy territory forcing a deciding Game 7 in the ‘Boro.

“When you have a defence like this,” an elated Carlson said, “it’s easy to come and do what you have to do.”

“We’ll have to pull up our socks and play the game of our lives,” said Shattler, whose three goals and two assists went to waste.

With Steenhuis and Vinc back in the fold, and momentum and home crowd of 3,784 on their side, the stage seemed set for the Lakers to cap an improbably comeback.

It looked even more like it when Steenhuis

popped a pair of goals helping the Lakers build a 4-2 first period lead that saw Kirk pulled in favour of Brandon Miller, seeing his first action in the series. It was the series turning point.

Miller was beaten just once in the second period but the Chiefs managed only a goal making it 5-3 Peterborough headed to the final frame.

What was witnessed in that period left the usually boisterous crowd in stunned silence. The Chiefs fired six unanswered goals, powered by four points each from Jamieson and Shattler, while Miller blanked the Lakers high-powered offence for 36 minutes, 43 seconds. After losing five straight playoff series to Peterborough since they last beat them in 1996, the Chiefs had beaten the man.

“We just kept plugging,” Jamieson said. “We had some good looks but (Vinc) is a world class goalie. I play with him in Rochester so we know what he’s capable of doing. It was just a matter of keeping composure.”

The better team won, said Sullivan.

“There is nobody in the dressing room with a dry head. They tried as hard as they could,” he said.

It was particularly gratifying for Kilgour to get the Lakers monkey off their back – in Peterborough no less.

“Especially after a heartbreaking loss in Game 6,” Kilgour said. “A lot of things were set against us.”

Two weeks later the Chiefs celebrated a second consecutive Mann Cup after again beating Victoria. **OLM**

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