

Schomberg gets 3-point games from Kokelj and Miehm to sweep Huntsville from PJHL playoffs

By Jim Stewart

The third-place Schomberg Cougars defeated Huntsville 5-0 on Tuesday evening and swept the seventh-place Otters from the PJHL playoffs four games to none. Cougars Coach Stan Kondrotas was happy with his team's decisive Game Four performance: "This game was about closing the door when we needed to and getting the things done that good hockey teams do." The clincher at the Trisan Centre was played in front of 246 fans and featured a pair of timely 3-point nights by Cougar veterans Cameron Kokelj and Luke Miehm. Coach Kondrotas assessed his top players' performances: "Luke's a hard player to play against. He can play any way he wants to play. Cam's focus is on the W's, not just points. They both knew they had to pick it up in this big game. At the end of the day, they're the leaders of the team." Also in the winners' spotlight was Vann Kulba who continued his hot goaltending in March by turning aside all 26 Otter shots to earn the shutout. Kulba has three shutouts in his last three starts: regular season victories versus Caledon and Penetang, as well as Tuesday's playoff series clincher versus Huntsville. Coach Kondrotas noted Kulba's recent success and maturation as a PJHL goaltender: "He's got three shutouts in a row. He's grown as a player and he's getting better and better. It's great when your number two goalie can step up like this. The team played a lot better in front of him on Tuesday night." Captain Cameron Kokelj echoed his coach's assessment of Kulba: "Yeah, Vann's really been playing well for us lately and it's great we can rely on him back there to make those extra saves and keep us in close games. It's really great to have a young goalie performing so well in the best part of the season." The Cougars jumped out to a 3-0 lead in Game 4 and got the quick start that has epitomized so many Schomberg victories this season. Kokelj opened the scoring for Schomberg less than five minutes into the game on assists from Evan Wilson and Luke Miehm. Kokelj's goal at 4:22 was his fourth of the series. Speedy Cougar defenceman Lucas Vacca made it 2-0 less than four minutes later at 8:09. Wesley O'Hara and Matthew Lycheke drew assists on Vacca's first goal of the playoffs. Schomberg's top line struck three minutes later when Carlo Lioni, assisted by Kokelj and Miehm, increased the home side's lead to 3-0 heading into the first intermission. Kokelj commented on the trio's efficacy versus Huntsville: "I think our line was really working well and using our speed and physicality which led us to have time and space and be productive." The Cougars maintained their three-goal margin until 15:47 of the second period when another productive forward, Anthony Nascimento, tallied his third goal of the series. Miehm drew his third assist of the game and Kokelj earned his third point of the game on Nascimento's marker to pace the Cougars to a 4-0 lead heading into the final frame. Miehm ended up just a goal short of a "Gordie Howe Hat Trick" versus Huntsville after he dropped the flippers to defend himself against instigative Otter Josh Cormier at 11:52 of the third period. The veteran Cougar, with 5 assists in the series, contributed offensive prowess and timely grit in Schomberg's series-clinching game over the feisty Otters. Huntsville was the third-most penalized team in the 60-team league and, true to form, the Otters played "predatory hockey" - predictably playing a man short for most of the final frame as tempers flared at the Trisan Centre. Jordan Palazzo's unassisted goal, with 12 seconds left in the game, provided the Cougars' margin of victory and wrapped up his team's sweep on Tuesday night. Palazzo's goal demonstrated his team's playoff scoring balance as ten Cougars scored at least one goal in the four-game series. In addition to scoring balance, Kokelj thought the key to the win was "staying out of the penalty box so we could stick to hockey, play our fast game, and I think it resulted in our best game of the series." The 4-game sweep by Schomberg was made possible by a narrow 4-3 victory in Huntsville on Sunday night in Game 3 in what turned out to be the closest game of the series. The home team opened the scoring at the Canada Summit Centre when Caleb Jones fired a power play goal for the Otters at 8:51 of the first period. The Cougars responded with a power play goal of their own. Jacob Duggan tied the game 1-1 with 1:02 left in the period with assists on the tying goal earned by Andrew Parsons and Cameron Kokelj. Jordan Palazzo put the Cougars into a 2-1 lead less than 3 minutes into the second period on helpers from Jacob Futas and Anthony Nascimento. Four minutes later, Captain Kokelj struck for his third goal of the playoffs, assisted by Carlo Lioni, to give Schomberg a 3-1 lead that they rode into the intermission. Huntsville's power play struck again at 6:57 of the third period when Nate Markle's goal pulled the Otters to within one goal, but Anthony Nascimento restored Schomberg's two-goal lead at 7:38 with Jacob Futas drawing the lone assist. Nascimento's marker turned out to be the game-winning goal because the pesky Otters - fighting for their playoff lives - scored with 59 seconds remaining in the game. Adam Dupuis beat Cougars' goaltender Matthew Lunghi to cut Huntsville's deficit to one. However, it was as close as Huntsville could get on a night when Schomberg outshot the Otters 47-23 and eked out the crucial road victory. The Cougars

now play tgeh Alliston Hornets with the first game Friday in Alliston. Game twois Saturday at the Trisan Centre at 8 p.m.