



NAUGHTY Nottingham Panther Jason Martin uses his stick for unfair purposes to bring down Andy Leggatt during Sunday's classic ice hockey game. Photo: Joan Harries. (x1049)



Panthers humbled — now for Barons!

by PAUL NEWMAN

LEE Valley Lions belied the form books to produce the first big upset of the ice hockey season by beating Nottingham Panthers 3-2 on Sunday.

The Lions went into their debut match in the Norwich Union Cup without any hard pre-season challenge matches, but immediately clicked into a fluent pattern to defeat a team rated as the second best in England after Durham.

And the victory was achieved without top English player Chris Leggatt and several other squad men to increase the feeling of pleasure in the Lee Valley camp.

Nottingham finished sixth in the premier division last season and are probably the strongest team the Lions have ever faced — but from the start it was impossible for an outsider to tell which was the premier side.

Lee Valley's new import Jari Virta made an immediate impact in his debut match in Britain and showed early evidence of his undoubted skill and inspirational qualities.

It was Virta who linked with Geoff Williams to set up Janne Lehti for the Lions' first goal of the season after almost six minutes of play and the 700 plus crowd warmed to an even match which produced everything that is good in British hockey.

Lehti made it two with assists from Andy Leggatt and Virta and the Panthers retreated to their dressing room at the end of the first period knowing they had to produce something special to avoid a major upset.

They did manage to get back in the game with a strike from import Jim Keyes in a tight second stanza, but the crucial blow came seconds after when Virta netted an unassisted goal which proved to be the match winner and was ample reward for the Finn's composed display which augers well for the future.

Nottingham's new import Terry Kurtenbach scored the only goal of the final period as the Lions held on to win thanks to some hard working hockey and intelligent line changes from new coach Richie Doran.

Doran marshalled his team superbly throughout the game and his tactics compared favourably with those of the Panthers' Alex Dampier, rated as one of the most shrewd coaches in the country.

Also noticeable was the self discipline in the Lions' players when faced with one of the strictest referees in Britain, Jim Taylor, who seems to want to make ice hockey a non-contact sport judging by some of his penalties!

But the Lions refused to be bothered — unlike the Panthers — and their defensive display against talented men like Keyes and Jamie Crapper was top notch and worthy of the premier division.

Lehti was his usual commanding self and Geoff Williams and Erskine Douglas were in

inspired form.

However, the star of the blue line was another debutant, Alistair Rodger from Glasgow who received the man of the match award and was brilliant in top quality company.

And what happened when Nottingham got past the formidable four defenders? The best goal-minder in the country was ready to thwart them.

Vesa Pennanen has lost a lot of weight during the summer (not that he was ever overweight anyway) and is determined to improve upon even his outstanding form of the last two years.

He was better than ever on Sunday — particularly when it most mattered in the last minute when he made two super saves as the Panthers pressed hard for an equaliser.

Said Lions manager Mike Smith: "We mustn't get over confident and we must remember that Nottingham had a hard game at Solihull on Saturday, but even so our display was very encouraging. Several players were superb and some of Janne's dekes were a joy to watch — if you can deke premier division players with regularity like he did then you must be good."

The Lions continue their tough Norwich Union schedule at Lee Valley on Sunday when they meet their old rivals Soli-

hull Barons at 5.30pm.

If the Lions repeat their Nottingham form anything is possible and there is a growing feeling in hockey that top slot in the Norwich Union South England group could be decided between first division sides Lee Valley and Telford — the Tigers signed Jeff Smith on Friday and are looking equally as formidable as the Lions.

Chris Leggatt and Geoff Delderfield should be back in the team this week after holidays and Gary Bayliss is expected to play after being dropped from the Panthers match for failing to turn up for a practice game against Richmond last week.

Add them to the strong squad already assembled (including Dave Petrie and Nigel Auguste, who have returned after an absence from Lee Valley and new signings like Martyn Barratt from Altrincham and Phil Gosbee from Medway) and you can see why the Lions are so optimistic about the months ahead after their memorable start to the current campaign.

● Lions boss Mike Smith is still interested in signing Dave Rapley, even though he has joined Slough. Rapley was watching Sunday's game at Lee Valley and had talks with Mike Smith afterwards.

● The Guardian-Gazette's strong links with the Lions were increased even further last week when sports reporter Richard Lewis was appointed as joint rink announcer at home matches along with Charlie Sumner.



GUARDIAN-Gazette managing director Rex Pardoe congratulates Lions captain Geoff Williams on his side's thrilling win on Sunday. Williams has been sponsored by us for the last three years and our valuable financial help has kept him at the club despite several offers from other teams. Also pictured is advertising director Roger Carter and Waltham Forest Guardian editor John James, who were part of the Guardian-Gazette party present at the game. (X1051)