

Zac Chamberlain scores twice in 5-3 win v Sheffield

The Badgers haven't taken long to experience that winning feeling. In only their third competitive game, the Honey Badgers of Coventry took away their first victory, and are now 1-1-1 on the season after a draw v Cardiff Bay Lightning and an away loss to Cardiff Demons. Saturday night's affair at the Skydome saw a Badgers squad moving much closer to full strength, with Zac Chamberlain making his debut on the top line alongside Craig Newton and Chris Armstrong. The Badgers were missing Rich George and Hannah Bridges due to prior commitments, but also welcomed Martin Gemza on defence.



The opening few shifts saw a slightly nervous Badgers start as they worked out their opponents, with Chamberlain already showing some hint of his talent by zipping a shot just wide of the post off an Armstrong feed. However, it was the Vipers who scored first after Badgers nettie Colin Bennett made a save, but the puck somehow squirmed free and .Anthony Vickers tapped home the loose puck as the Badgers waited for a whistle.

This goal seemed to sting the Badgers into life, and it was the "Hot Line" of Luke Smith, Paul Wheeler and Mark Wells who made the breakthrough at 7:30-Wells winning a puck on his own blueline and feeding a deflected pass to Smith down the right side, who was joined by Wheeler on a 2-on-1 with the Vipers defence. Smith pulled wide before feeding a pinpoint pass across for Wheeler to force the puck home at the far post. This goal means that the line extend their streak of scoring in every Badgers game so far with a total of five goals and ten points in four games, and also puts Smith as the current team top points scorer with 5.

This goal seemed to cause the Badgers to step up a gear, with Ed Jubber and Alex Bailey in particular playing out of their skins on the fourth line and keeping the puck in the Vipers zone for long periods. However, it was the third line who made the next breakthrough-Matt Rollins battling hard to win a loose puck behind the net for Richard Butlin to shoot-the shot was saved but Scott Bonsor followed up to make it 2-1.

The Vipers were by no means idle in the offensive zone, meanwhile-they looked to break up ice at every opportunity but Bennett and his defence held firm-a nervous moment caused by Simon Manning losing the puck in his own zone was confidently dealt with, with Manning himself making amends with a beautifully-timed diving poke check to deny a Bastow breakaway moments later. The Badgers extended their advantage at 18:30, as John Nurden's dogged defensive work forced the Vipers to dump the puck in with no reward-the puck found its way eventually to Tom Walker, who waited for the optimum moment before firing a clever reverse pass that released Zac Chamberlain for a break which the quicksilver number 21 gleefully seized upon, skating into the zone unmolested and firing a hard wristshot across the goalie into the top corner from the right circle. The second period saw the Badgers start as they'd ended the first-coaches Dave Adey and Paul Brown had their team working hard and effectively as a unit, with Steu Durham and Simon Manning making confident rushes up the ice at every opportunity as the team pressed for a fourth. It was captain Craig Newton who got it, setting up a cycle before finding space in the slot and calmly roofing an Armstrong pass, Chamberlain getting the second assist.

The game was beginning to get a little chippy as the Vipers got frustrated with the high-pressure Badgers defensive style, with contact levels rising. However, it boiled over when Bonsor landed a nasty check from behind on a Vipers player-gloves were dropped and blows exchanged before the Badgers forward received a ten-minute misconduct for his trouble. The Vipers took heart, scoring shortly afterward as Vickers broke into the zone before cutting across the net and letting a shot go which sneaked through Bennett's five-hole. This could have been a turning-point of the game, but the Badgers took the blow on the chin and settled back down to their efforts-the line of Smith, Wells and Wheeler linking well to force several opportunities, and John Warburton driving a shot just wide from the point. However, the period ended with the Badgers 4-2 up.

The third period was again tight and chippy. With the Badgers down to three full lines due to Bonsor's misconduct, Jubber, Bailey and Butlin were combining to pin the Vipers in their zone, and the defensive pairing of Nurden and Walker were distributing the puck well. Walker won the puck on the penalty kill and then received a nasty slash for his troubles from a Viper-however, this argument as play continued meant that the Sheffield player left his team one short on defence, and the home side made him pay-Nurden finding Chamberlain with a fine pass for the debutant to get his second of the game.

Chamberlain had been getting under the Vipers' skin all night with his speed and relentless pressure, and it finally reached boiling point as he received a vicious two-handed slash from a Vipers forward in front of the benches that threatened to cut his body in half, followed by three

hard cross-checks to the face as the Vipers sought to start a scrap. The Badger showed excellent restraint, merely grinning at his attacker as he went to the box.

The Vipers gave themselves some hope of a comeback with a goal Bennett will want back-a-routine stick save on a Josh Bastow shot turned bad as the puck took a bad deflection up and over his shoulder. However, the goalie made amends moments later with a superb sprawling save, sliding across the net on his side to deny Bastow his second. The game ticked down, with Chamberlain coming agonisingly close to getting a hat-trick as his redirect of a Bailey pass dribbled along the goal-line. However, the team stood firm and closed out the final few minutes to seal a deserved victory at the Skydome.

Badgers MOM was Colin Bennett for his 29 saves from 32 shots, but it could have been any one of several, with Ed Jubber, Matt Rollins, Alex Bailey and Zac Chamberlain just some of the players who stood out in a win in which every Badger more than played their part. This was a fine team performance which will raise already high morale levels even further, as well as give the team some confidence in themselves going into the upcoming Cross Border Classic against the Kirkcaldy Kings, which is looking like possibly their sternest test to date.