

Tuesday 6 October 2009

Tuesday is game day – the day we had been looking forward to since the opening of training camp in Christchurch. The day was to consist of a few non-strenuous activities, and game preparation.

The morning began at 8pm, with the usual breakfasts being delivered to our hotel rooms. A few hours later, at 10am, we were treated to a luxury for New Zealanders- there was an NHL ice hockey game on television on Fox Sports! The team gathered into their rooms and were glued to their televisions until 12:30pm. The New York Rangers prevailed over the New Jersey Devils, 3-2. This game had the kids buzzing, and thinking of hockey for the rest of the day.

Following the game, the team strolled across the Queanbeyan River to the local mall to get lunch and kill some time. Most of the kids went to Subway, and a few others to the Ali Baba kebab shop. Upon returning to the hotel, Andy and I met with the individual lines explaining expectations and goals. We were ready for the game.

The game began at 6pm with a brief warm-up, gift exchange, ceremonial face-off, and the Haka led by Reuben Burgess. The Haka was extremely fierce and proud. The game however, did not follow the same pattern.

The first period was very lacklustre, with the Kiwis showing heavy legs and executing inaccurate passes. Simple mistakes and missed assignments were made throughout. The first goal came with ACT working the puck from the corner, and a centring pass finding an ACT player at the edge of the crease for a quick tap-in. The period ended with ACT ahead 1-0, and New Zealand only managed 2 shots.

At the intermission, Andy and I stressed quick flow, keeping the legs moving, and not to panic with the puck. Although ACT still had a few chances in the 2nd period, goaltender Csaba Kersco-Magos kept the puck out of the net. New Zealand began to find their legs, and passes became more precise. New Zealand managed 9 shots in that period, but the score was still 1-0 for ACT.

The momentum continued to shift towards New Zealand in the 3rd period. As the period wore on, ACT continued to defend and New Zealand continued the pressure. Finally, with 2:30 left in the game, Jaxson Lane grabbed the puck from a goalmouth scramble, and put it top shelf with a nifty backhand. The game was now tied 1-1, with 2 minutes left. ACT was shocked, and New Zealand continued the pressure. Two shifts later, the combination of Lane and Kevin Jagau found an opening in the ACT defence, and Jagau was sent in on a breakaway. Jagau made no mistake, and after a clever deke he buried the puck into the net on his backhand. 2-1 now for New Zealand. Jagau potted another one with 3 seconds remaining into the empty net, marking the final score: 3- 1. Victory for New Zealand.

ACT played a fundamentally strong game, but cracked in the final minutes of the game. New Zealand however, became stronger as the game wore on. This is usually typical of past New Zealand U16 teams since 2004 – they get stronger as the tour goes on. The first game is always the toughest one, as players nerves, combined with unfamiliarity make for a very disjointed game. This was evident today, but New Zealand prevailed, and now shows great promise for the coming games of this 2009 Australian tour.

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