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Vipers Cherish Growth

By Scott Douglas *Morning Star* Staff

Mark Holick left the Vernon Multiplex Wednesday afternoon not only proud of what his players accomplished on the ice, but of their growth away from the rink. The Vipers' head coach met with all his players individually two days after being eliminated from the B.C. Hockey League's Fred Page Cup final.

"At the start of the season you set a goal to improve every day," said Holick. "I thought we accomplished that this season. At the end of the day, I think we were a lot better hockey club at the end than we were in September. I think we grew by leaps and bounds not only on the ice, but off the ice as well. We have a group of tremendous young men that this community can be very proud of, and a group that I'm very proud of."

The Vipers graduate six 20-year-olds including captain Mike Ullrich, goalie Nick Olynyk, blueliners Brent Saukarookoff and Sean Perkins, and forwards Andrew Coburn and Chris Budnick. Patrick Cey leaves Vernon for the UMass-Lowell River Hawks next season and Kyle St. Denis is bound for the WHL Kelowna Rockets. It leaves just eight holes in the Vipers' lineup, but they're not easy holes to fill.

... Olynyk turned critics into believers with his best play coming in the post-season. "When it started out, my main motivation was to beat Penticton, I can't lie about that," said Olynyk, who was dealt by the Vees to Powell River in the summer after Corey Milan opted to return for another year of junior.

"But I was challenged early and I started to have fun. It was so easy, the easiest time of my career because I was able to just show up and play. Through that, I finally proved to myself that I can do it, that I can be successful in hockey. It took me four years and six teams, but I finally believe now that I can do it." Olynyk was fabulous through the Vipers' playoff run, recording back-to-back shutouts against the Vees and maintaining a league-best 92.84 save percentage and 2.20 goals-against average over 22 post season starts.

"I've always thought of Vernon as the best program and I'm not just saying that because this is where my junior career is ending," said Olynyk, a thoughtful, deep thinker who grew up 20 minutes away from Viper grad Matt Zaba in Saskatchewan. "Ever since Matt came here, I knew that. I knew the pride and professionalism of this program. The way Duncan (team owner Wray) treats us is unbelievable. I've seen a lot of programs and trust me you don't get treated this well other places."