

Defending WCSLA champions win thriller

Ladner Pioneers rally late in Victoria with provincial final rematch up next on Thursday

Mark Booth / Delta Optimist

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Tyler Kirkby is among the key returning players for the defending West Coast Senior Lacrosse Association champion Ladner Pioneers. Photograph By GORD GOBLE

The defending West Coast Senior Lacrosse League champions opened their season with a dramatic victory in the provincial capital.

Mike Berekoff scored two goals in the final minute, including the game winner with just two seconds remaining, to lift the Ladner Pioneers to an 11-10 victory over the Victoria Wolves on Sunday night.

Berekoff's heroics capped an impressive return to his hometown team after not playing last season. He finished the night with a hat trick, along with two assists.

The Wolves looked to be on their way to victory when Josh Nelson made it 10-8 with 7:04 remaining. Nate Clare scored with 3:18 left, then set-up Berekoff's tying goal. A big face-off win by Patrick Szabo gave Ladner final possession.

Szabo was one of three 2017 Junior "A" Islander graduates in the line-up, joining Mitch Winter and Jack Berry.

Winter is continuing a family tradition that saw his dad Tim thrive in a Pioneer uniform for years. His late grandfather Rod Winter was the team's longtime general manager.

The Pioneers were left with a number of vacancies on their roster after last season's memorable run that concluded with a fifth place finish at the President's Cup in Six Nations, ON.

"We lost about 10 players for a variety of reasons," said Ladner head coach Ross Frehlick. "We have managed to bring in some junior grads and sign some new guys too."

Among the additions is goaltender Zach Wickett who will make his debut on Thursday when the Pioneers host Royal City in a rematch of last year's West Coast Senior Lacrosse Association Championship series.

The hometown product played last season for the WLA's Langley Thunder.

He will share the crease with veterans Nathan Wilson and Rob Cook for now.

The Pioneers begin the season with defensive standouts Sam Clare and Mike Avery sidelined with injuries. Both are expected back at some point. Avery was named the league's top defender in 2017.

"Our goal is to be in the top two and hopefully not see (President's Cup host) Nanaimo until the final," added Frehlick who knows that would mean a nationals berth would be locked up.

"There are always guys interested in playing here, especially when the President's Cup is in B.C. But until they actually sign, it doesn't mean anything. Regardless, it's not going to disrupt the core of this team."