

BACKED BY LA KINGS PROSPECTS, OHL FINAL BERTH ADDS TO STEELHEADS' RAGS-TO-RICHES SEASON

👤 Ryan Cowley 🕒 April 27, 2017



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When they opened their season with a 7-0 loss on home ice back in September, few, if any, would have given the **Mississauga Steelheads** much of a chance.

Gone from the previous season, among others, were the club's leading scorer **Alex Nylander** and starting netminder **Jack Flinn**, so 2016-17 looked to be a rebuilding year. But, like any rebuilding team, troubles were expected. If their lopsided season-opening loss wasn't enough, the Steelheads had suffered a nine-game losing streak in November and the following month, had the worst record in the entire **Ontario Hockey League**.

But, the new calendar year brought with it a new sense of promise for the Steelheads.

Los Angeles Kings prospect **Jacob Moverare** was new in town, so was **Vili Saarijarvi**, a puck-moving defenseman the Steelheads had acquired from the **Flint Firebirds**. Up front, captain **Michael McLeod**, **Owen Tippett** and **Nathan Bastian** were all looking good — and once, he returned from injury, **Spencer Watson** wasted no time showing off his natural scoring touch.

Suddenly, the **Steelheads went** 6-1 from Dec. 30 to Jan. 13 and 7-2 from Jan. 24 to Feb. 12 before reeling off 10 wins in their last 11 games before losing their regular-season finale. Just like that, the once-basement-dwelling Steelheads were **Central Division** champions.

This season, this writer has had the privilege of covering both of the Steelheads' Kings prospects, the aforementioned Moverare and Watson. Yet, while the former is only in his rookie season, the latter, who turned 21 this week, is on the opposite end of his junior career as he hopes to win the **J. Ross Robertson Cup** — and maybe even a **Memorial Cup** next month — before turning pro. As for Moverare, though, he has come

a long way since October, working vigorously to improve on his weak skating skills while adding more to his then-underwhelming physical game.

“You don’t see this very often,” Steelheads coach James Richmond **told the Toronto Star** last Sunday. “That movie, *Major League*, comes to mind. But really, when we lost nine in a row back in November there, we were close, we outshot teams, but we weren’t getting the breaks.”

While the Steelheads franchise did reach the **Memorial Cup Final** in 2011 as the Majors, the club were in the prestigious tournament as the host city, meaning that they did not have to go the distance in their own league’s playoffs to enter. So, this spring is a special one in Mississauga as the Steelheads have been celebrating unprecedented success since the beginning of the second round — where the franchise has not been before. But, after eliminating **Ottawa** and **Oshawa**, the Steelheads swept the East-leading **Peterborough Petes** to win their first **Bobby Orr Trophy**, igniting a brand new level of excitement for the city of Mississauga and their team’s loyal fanbase.

It remains to be seen who the Steelheads will meet in the **OHL Final** but one thing is for certain: this is a team that is as determined as ever to book a trip to Windsor next month as they hope to finish what they started six years earlier.

But, one step at a time.