

League champs have Edmonton's number

Contributed by Joanne Ireland
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Short on socks and other such sundries, the Milwaukee Wave are finally heading home.

At least they will be packing another win.

The Wave, the National Professional Soccer League's defending champs, had to revamp their travel plans when winter whipped through the United States, then rolled into Edmonton for a Monday night rematch against the Drillers.

It was a game billed as the clash of the contenders, the tango of the titans. It ended up as another punctuation mark by the Wave.

Improving to 12-4 with a 10-7 victory at Skyreach Centre, the Wave maintain the bragging rights to the league's best record. The Drillers, now 11-6, remain first in the North Division, second overall.

"We're not ready to be the top team, the top dog," said head coach Ross Ongaro. "We have lots to learn."

Before a crowd of 4,987, Milwaukee jumped out to a 4-0 first- quarter lead.

It wasn't until the second frame was under way that the Drillers started to chip away at the deficit.

First, it was Domenic Mobilio, who redirected a 60-foot shot from Nikola Vignjevic. Then Martin Dugas left-footed a feed from Todd Rattee on a power play.

The Wave wasted no time in responding and took a 6-3 lead to the locker room at halftime.

"Our personal battles, our individual effort wasn't as strong as it should have been," said Drillers midfielder Kevin Holness. "They were beating us to the ball. They were outthrusting us. They were stronger physically. And in the end, they finished their chances. They capitalized.

"We had several opportunities to score, to pull away, but as has happened to us in the past, if we don't finish, the team seems to struggle and stay behind the eight ball."

After a scoreless third quarter, one that saw the Drillers take just two shots on goal -- easy pickings for Victor Nogueira, the Wave's veteran goalkeeper - - Milwaukee put the game away.

All it took was a pair of two-point goals and this one was over. Game. Set. Match.

The Wave hammered the Drillers 21-6 in Milwaukee on Dec. 31.

"This was a good measuring stick for us," said Edmonton's Marty Nash. "They're a good team. But it's early in the season; we can learn from our mistakes and get better.

"We had a lot of chances, we just didn't finish them."

The Drillers outshot their foes 31-23.

The Wave, meanwhile, fly home this morning, four days later than the original itinerary.

Following a New Year's Day tilt in Kansas City, the Wave got wind of the storms thrashing the U.S. so rather than return to Milwaukee - - one more city that saw its airport shut down -- the club headed to Toronto.

They managed to get on a plane bound for Edmonton on Sunday.

"It was a playoff game," concluded Ongaro, "an intense, high- pressure game, and if you want to win the championship, if you want to win the division, you have to play at that level. This was totally different from any other teams we've played against."

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DRILL BITS

* **WAVE 'EM ON:** The Milwaukee Wave improved to 12-4 with a 10-7 victory over the Edmonton Drillers. The Drillers maintain their hold on first place in the North Division with an 11-6 record. Only three teams in the loop kicked off the New Year with wins in double digits. The St. Louis Ambush, 11-7, is the other hot squad.

* **POINT MEN:** Michael King topped the Wave's point-getters with six on the night -- two two-point goals plus two assists. For Edmonton, Domenic Mobilio, Paul Dailly and Chris Handsor all chipped in two-point goals. Martin Dugas added a one-point power-play goal.

* **SHORT CIRCUIT:** John Pino was tripped up by the league rule book, putting his return to the Drillers' lineup on hold. The Edmonton native, who played his last game in 1997, had been pegged as a pinch-hitter for Siphio Sibiya but because he wasn't on the 16- man roster or the four-man developmental team, the league rejected his contract. Alfredo Valente was bumped up for Monday's game but didn't see any playing time. Sibiya, meanwhile, is awaiting surgery to repair a torn Achilles tendon.

* **SNOW ROUTE:** The Wave, in Kansas City for a New Year's game against the Attack, thrashed out new travel plans when the storms hit the U.S. Rather than fly from K.C. to Milwaukee, the Wave flew to Toronto then boarded a flight west on Sunday. After a five-hour wait on the runway, the plane headed to Edmonton.

* **NEXT UP:** The Florida Thundercats, 8-9 and backstopped by former Driller Scott Hileman, roll into Edmonton Wednesday. Kickoff is 7:05 p.m.