

Sports

Eagles celebrate season with awards banquet

BY Johnnie Bachusky, MVP Staff

INNISFAIL – The Vanberg Cup champion Innisfail Eagles Hockey Club has officially ended its historic 2024-25 season with flair, pride and optimism for the future.

On April 25, the senior men's hockey team hosted an awards banquet in the auditorium of the Royal Canadian Legion Branch #104 in Innisfail to honour the club's best of the best during its past inaugural season in the North Central Hockey League (NCHL).

With team director Jason Heistad emceeing, the evening included a roast dinner, entertainment from Innisfail's Cole Malone, a silent auction, and a Hot Stove Lounge with the Eagles' Drew Coles and Kevin McMillan.

"In the past we kind of waited too long to plan these things, and the turnouts aren't as good, and we wanted to get it as soon as possible after the hockey season was done while people were still interested in hockey," said club president Randy Graham. "I got to give a lot of credit to Jason Heistad who had the vision to regenerate it, and he brought it to another level."

But it was mostly an evening to celebrate a triumphant season that began with unknowns.

The prior two seasons saw the hockey team playing in the AAA senior men's Chinook Hockey League (CHL) that had seen its fortunes decline to just two teams; Innisfail and the Stony Plain Eagles.

The Innisfail Eagles were champions in their final two CHL seasons but decided in 2024 to move to the healthy nine-team NCHL in 2024.

The Birds finished in third place in the AA league but faced another



The 2025 Innisfail Eagles team award winners were announced April 25 at a banquet night at the Innisfail Royal Canadian Legion Branch #104. From left to right is Ryan Dodd, head coach; goaltender Chance Griffith, forward Quintin Lisoway, defenceman Joe Vandermeer and forward Tyler Berkholtz. Eagles forward Mike Marianchuk, who was unable to attend the banquet, was a double award winner.

Johnnie Bachusky/MVP Staff

serious challenge in the opening best-of-five playoff round against the pesky sixth place Devon Barons.

The Birds soon found themselves faced with elimination in the best-of-five series but roared back with two wins to move on.

It was at this point where the Eagles gelled as a team of destiny.

Behind the outstanding goaltending from rookie Chance Griffith, the Eagles rolled past Wetaskiwin three games to one in the semifinals and then beat the defending NCHL champion Lacombe Generals four games to one in the finals.

"We've got warrior hockey players that just go to war every time they come to the rink," noted Eagles head coach Ryan Dodd. "But the one thing that we echoed over and over again was that we were going to have fun, and there's no more fun than winning."

Dodd, who is also the team's general manager and vice-president, received the first of seven team awards handed out.

The nearly 30-year team veteran received the Eagles' Volunteer of the Year Award.

Eagles' sniper Mike Marianchuk, who was unable to attend the awards right due to an out-of-town work commitment, won the team's leading scorer and fan's choice awards.

His father Lyle accepted both awards on his behalf.

And then came the Rookie of the Year Award, and that went to the team's hot playoff goalie Griffith, who won the NCHL's Vanberg Cup series

Most Valuable Player Award.

"We're really lucky to have him playing this season because he stepped up and gave us everything he had," said Dodd in presenting the award to the 24-year-old Griffith.

The next presentation was for the team's Defensive Player of the Year, and it went to the remarkable 48-year-old veteran Joe Vandermeer.

And then came two new awards.

The first was the Tyler Haarstad Rise N'Grind Award that honours the spirit and dedication to hockey by the late Eagles' forward.

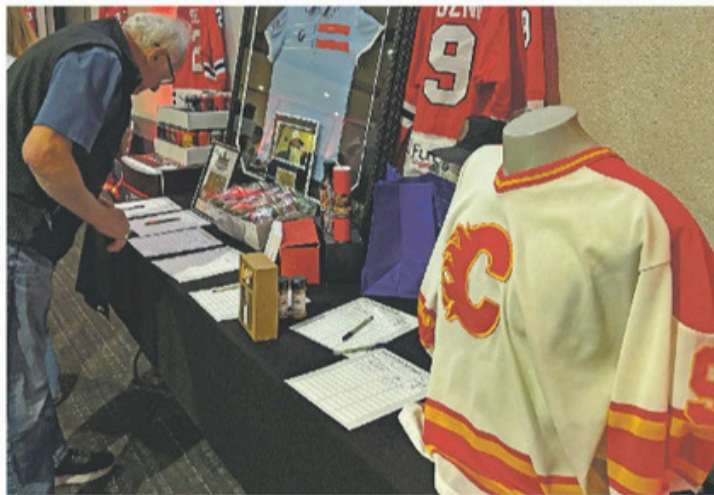
The winner was Tyler Berkholtz.

And then there was the Frank Layden Leadership Award, which also honours another past player. Layden played 14 years with the team, eight as captain.

Dodd said a new special trophy was created and will "stick with the team."

He presented the award with club director Vern Loughlin to Eagles' forward Quintin Lisoway.

"I'm at a loss for words. I didn't expect this," said Lisoway. "We showed a lot of resiliency, and then it showed the character of our team and the strength of the bonds we've been able to build over the course this year."



The Innisfail Eagles Awards Banquet on April 25 at the Innisfail Royal Canadian Legion Branch #104 also featured a silent auction.

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