

Is ice hockey schedule a level playing field?

Interesting to note that Cardiff Devils are in Scotland for a double-header this weekend. They play Fife Flyers at Kirkcaldy on Saturday (19.15) and then make the short trip north to square-up to Dundee Stars on Sunday (17.00). It is understood that they are flying into Edinburgh.

Flyers motored to Guildford on Sunday (18.00) after beating Nottingham Panthers 9-7 at Kirkcaldy on Saturday. Sleep, early start on the bus, however, they edged Flames 3-2 in a tough game then returned to Kirkcaldy by bus overnight.

Then they boarded a bus on Wednesday at 8am and arrived in Cardiff – with a lunch stop-over – at 5pm, played the game (19.30) and returned to Fife overnight after the disappointment of losing two late goals to go down 3-2.

A level playing field? Perhaps not. Players need rest, particularly as they are involved in the world's fastest team sport which demands high energy. The crowd who turn up and pay at the door with their hard-earned cash deserve to see athletes perform at their best.

Sitting on a bus for around nine hours only two days after another 800 mile-plus road trip is arguably not the best

preparation. Yes, road trips are part of an ice hockey player's life here and abroad, but there is a limit.

Flyers had a disastrous run of form and injuries in December but could the schedule have played a part. Consider this, Coventry (h) on December 2, Guildford (a) on December 3, Sheffield (h) on December 10, Sheffield (a) on December 16, Cardiff (h) on December 17, Belfast (a) on December 22, Belfast (h) on December 23, Dundee (h) on December 26, Dundee (a) on December 27, Glasgow (a) on December 30, Glasgow (h) on December 31, all in the league.

They also sandwiched in two Challenge Cup quarter-final games against Guildford (h) on December 6 and Guildford (a) December 13. One wonders if any other league on the planet has this tough a programme.

These are professional athletes and the pounding on the body is considerable. Injuries happen putting even more pressure on players to fill-in to cover. Mentally, it must be difficult to get up for so many games in a short period of time and travelling around the country by bus does take its toll. Ice hockey players from abroad may look at the scheduling of games in this country and think twice about putting pen on paper on a contract. I get that bus travel and not having to stay overnight saves cash, and cash is tight for most clubs, but there has to be a compromise.

The well-being of athletes must be addressed. Fans deserve the best possible show and could be watching a devalued product as fatigue – mental and physical – diminishes the overall quality of the package.

Double-headers and improved travel scheduling could possibly ease the burden. For example, Fife were in Guildford on Sunday. It is 135.3 miles from Surrey to Cardiff (2hr 51min).

Playing the game on Tuesday, giving the guys a day or rest, and then a return to Fife overnight could have been preferable. Yes, Tuesday is not a regular day for a Devils

game, but issues like this should be considered. Why? For the long-term benefit of the sport.

PICTURE: Cardiff v Fife on Wednesday. Picture James Assinder and courtesy of the Elite League