



Greatest moment for 'Streaky'

THE Lee Valley Lions are ready for the biggest match in their history when mighty Solihull come to town on Sunday — and captain Geof Williams declared this week: "This is the greatest moment of my career."

Solihull Barons are the new glamour club of ice hockey and have beaten several premier division teams this season.

They are unbeaten in the first division and have suffered only one defeat all campaign — in the Bluecol Cup semi-final against the eventual winners Durham Wasps.

Sunday's clash between Lee Valley, the team who have arrived on the hockey scene with a bang to lead the first division — and Solihull, everybody's tip to win the league, is eagerly awaited by all enthusiasts of this all-action sport.

And it is particularly special for Williams — the man who was born barely a slapshot's distance away from the Solihull rink and played for the Barons for seven years.

Said the inspirational defenceman: "I've played in some big games in my time, but nothing to match this Sunday. It's the biggest occasion for the whole team and everybody's full of confidence."

Williams (22), the man nicknamed 'Streaky' by Lee Valley fans because of his hair style, has fond memories of the times he spent with his home-town team before he moved South to play a leading role in the Lions' success story.

"I had a brilliant time with Solihull and learnt a lot from them and it will be great to see some of my old mates," he said.

And an interesting clash is in store when Geof com-



LEE Valley Lions captain Geof Williams relaxes at his Abbey Wood home with wife Tracey and little Streaky — otherwise known as recently born daughter Sophie-Ann. Photo: Steve Jacobs (x1014).

es face to face with his best friend — Barons forward Rod Turner.

Said Geof: "Rod was best man at my wedding and we played ice hockey together for years."

Then with a note of seriousness, he added: "But the only friends you have on the ice are the blokes with the same colour shirts as you. I'm not going to let Rod put one over on me and I can take him every time."

Turner has a reputation as a hard player, as do many of the Solihull team.

And he told the Guardian this week: "We're not

treating this match lightly and we know Lee Valley have a good team — there will be a lot of rivalry between me and Geof and I can promise you this — no prisoners will be taken!"

But Solihull know they won't be able to walk over the Lions in the same way as they have done to other first division teams.

Lee Valley have been beaten just twice in their nine first division games so far and are developing into a force to be reckoned with.

Said Williams: "Everything has gone so well for us and I think we're just three players short of being

a top side. Being captain means a hell of a lot to me and I owe a lot to our coach Dave Wurthman who made me the player I am. He may not be the best trainer in the world, but he's a fantastic coach and he gets the best out of people."

Now Geof's big ambition is to lead the Lions into the premier division, something which could happen next April.

But he added a note of warning to all the optimism:

"If we're going to be successful next season we must try our utmost to keep our goal-minder Vesa Penanen," he said. "We've won seven games this year, but I feel we'd have lost most of them if it wasn't for Vesa. He's quite simply the best goalie I've ever seen play in this country."

And Geof's form has been another vital factor for the Lions this season — he has obtained 22 indi-

vidual points in nine games — his best record ever.

So, can the Lions beat Solihull on Sunday? — a result which would send the Lee Valley rink wild.

"On paper they're firm favourites," said Williams. "But the mood is great in our camp and I've got a feeling we will pull it off. If Vesa plays well that could inspire us to do it".

The Lions have been training intensively all this week and manager Mike Smith commented: "I'm excited about the match and I think we can do it. They're a bit nervous of us which is good and this could be the turn around of the season.

And whatever happens on the ice, Williams will savour the occasion:

"I'll have a drink with their players after the game, win or lose," he said. "But the more we win by the more drunk I'll get!"

Newbon's slick outfit

A FEW years ago Solihull Barons were an average English ice hockey team.

Their transformation into the country's most talked about side has been spearheaded by their chairman Gary Newbon — the slick head of Central television sport.

His professional and disciplined attitude has been installed in the team and they have been preparing thoroughly for the Lee Valley encounter, which starts at 7pm at Lea Bridge Road.

When asked how much he knew about Lee Valley, Newbon said: "I know they have a very good goal-minder and I know about people like Rapley and, of course, Williams, but I also know that Lee Valley have conceded 30 goals this season, so the goalie is obviously not invincible. Also, he won't have faced shooting us good as he'll get on Sunday in this country — that's for sure."

Newbon is determined that the Barons will be promoted this season after just missing out last year.

He is confident his team will win the first division and he feels, Peterborough, Crowtree and Lee Valley will be the three teams hot on their heels in that order.

Said Newbon: "I don't think the others have a prayer. We beat Glasgow 14-2 the other week and I think they've lost too many games already to stake a challenge."

Newbon's team is led by player-coach Chuck Taylor, a Canadian who many feel has the hardest shot in the country.

And they have a new star in Taylor's friend Dean Vogelgesang. He has set the hockey world talking with his entertaining celebrations after he scores a goal.

In a televised match against Streatham, he executed several ballet moves and skidded along the centre of the ice after hitting the target — he also happens to be a very fine player.

Their third import is Mark "Bad-boy" Budz, a tough Canadian.

But there is a question mark over his fitness. He missed last week's game against Grimsby with a knee injury and may not play on Sunday. Solihull beat Grimsby 37-3.

But Newbon underlined his determination when he said: "If Budz can't play we'll cut him and fly in another Canadian. We can't have half-fit players in this team."

It is that professional approach which has taken Solihull to the top — but it is one which not everyone agrees with.