

## Storm Rohls to provincial title

Brendan Wood  
Staff Writer  
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**Airdrie Echo** — when Thomas Rohl started up the Airdrie Storm peewee football program a couple of seasons ago, he had no idea that in two short years he would win a league championship. Although the local team made it all the way to the Calgary and Area Peewee Football League Tier 3 championship game last year in its inaugural season, Rohl couldn't believe it, thinking it might have been simply a fortuitous series of events that allowed the Storm to get that far, as it was humbled by the Falcons in the title match.

But when the Storm made it to the same championship game this season, against the same Falcons club – and this time coming out on the winning end, taking the rematch 22-14 – Rohl began to take a closer look at what he was doing, realizing that maybe he and the other coaches were on the right track and that last season was no fluke. With the victory, the club advanced to the inaugural Tier 3 peewee provincial championships, with an opportunity to become the first team to etch its name on the newly minted trophy and to show that Airdrie was a force to be reckoned with on the gridiron field of battle.

That is exactly what happened Saturday on the frozen tundra of Calgary's Shouldice field, as the Airdrie Storm downed the northern Tier 3 champion Sherwood Park Cougars 20-0 to claim the provincial title.

Having never faced the Cougars before, coach Rohl and crew had no idea what to expect as they prepared for Saturday's showdown. But evidently the coaching staff had the squad ready to play.

The Storm pitched its first shutout of the season, taking the title in front of the loyal fans and supporters who braved the cold to come out and cheer on their beloved Airdrie kids.

The game began with both teams feeling each other out, with the Cougars initially finding success moving the ball on their first drive, mostly by way of reverses and razzle-dazzle plays that caught some the Airdrie defensive players off guard.

The Cougars marched the ball to the Storm 25-yard line, but the drive was stalled after successive defensive stops by Michael Clifford and then Shjon French and the Sherwood Park club turned the ball over on downs.

Over the next couple of possessions, neither team was able to make any progress as the first quarter ended the game remained scoreless.

However, the first Airdrie break came early in the second frame when defender Brandon Holmes blocked a Cougars punt, giving the Storm possession inside Cougars territory. The following Airdrie drive, which included a 20-yard pass completion from quarterback Casey Long to receiver Robert Horne, saw the offence march the ball 54 yards, capped off by a two-yard plunge by Long into the end zone to put the home team ahead 6-0.

Riding the momentum, French recovered a Cougars fumble on the ensuing kickoff – his second fumble recovery in as many games – which set up a second Airdrie touchdown when Landon Bayda scrambled 47 yards to pay dirt. With a successful two-point kick by French, the Storm took a 14-0 lead into half-time.

As the second half began, both teams appeared tentative, with neither able to put any points on the board.

After a scoreless third quarter, the game came down to the final frame, with the Storm ahead by a pair of touchdowns. The real turning point, however, came in the fourth quarter when, faced with a third-and-long inside its own five yard line, the Storm was ready to concede a two-point safety and possession of the football, thus giving Sherwood Park the ball back with plenty of time to mount a comeback.

Yet fortune was not on the Cougars side, as an untimely offside penalty gave Airdrie a first down at its own nine-yard line. What made it worse for the northern club was that on the very next play, Bayda rushed 91 yards for his second touchdown of the day to put his team up 20-0 with just over four minutes to play in the game, thus ending any realistic chances of a Cougars comeback.

A devastated Sherwood Park squad tried to mount one last drive, but failed to move the ball, as the Storm defence refused to yield any ground. The Airdrie offence ran the clock out on its final possession, thus sealing the victory.

Afterward, a teary-eyed Jane Rohl, the Airdrie team manager, said she was infinitely proud of the players, as well as the coaches who have worked so hard for the entire season.

"I'm just ecstatic for the kids. Thomas and the boys have worked very hard to get them where they are," she said. "It's really cool to see, it's just vindication for them that they're doing a good job with the program."

The head coach couldn't contain his emotions either, noting that the provincial title indeed shows that Airdrie is a force to be reckoned with.

"We can show all of Airdrie that we have a heck of a program here," Thomas Rohl said. "As long as we keep having athletes and kids who are dedicated to the game coming out every year, we can be very successful every season."

The Storm bench boss added that, after only two years of the Airdrie peewee program's existence, the coaches have a good idea of how they need to prepare the players in order to be successful.

"This proves to us as coaches that we're going in the right direction," he said. "The coaches tried to get the kids to just go out and do their job – not think about themselves, but to play as a team and that's exactly what they did."

Storm offensive coordinator Tyrell Rohl – one of three of Thomas sons who also coach the club – said that the victory is something the players and coaches will remember for the rest of their lives.

"Winning this game means that for a year you're the best team in the Tier 3 division," the assistant coach said.

"Nobody can take that away from you.

"Winning the Tier 3 city championship is an awesome thing, but to be the best in the province, that's something to behold for any football team," Tyrell added. "It doesn't get any better than that."