

Central York Panthers set to battle three Top Ten Canadian teams in opening round of OWHL Playoffs

Central York Panthers U22 Head Coach Steve Dempsey has his young team ready for the provincial playoff cauldron this weekend in Toronto at the Scotiabank Pond.

Coach Dempsey discussed the process that the team has experienced to prepare physically and mentally for the championships.

“In addition to practices, we brought in some alumni that have been through the Provincial Championships. One discussed what she learned from losing this year's USports Gold Medal game to Concordia while playing for the University of Toronto Blues. The team has been through a team-building process. They've had some players-only meetings. The older players are prepping the younger players for the pressures of the playoff run. This is [Captain] Hannah Clarke's third time in this situation, so she has lots to share with her younger teammates. They're drawing not only from their hockey playoff experiences, but many of our players have competed in the lacrosse provincials. Also, Jade Lore and Hailey Maguire have been to the finals of an Esso Cup and Hailey has won an Esso Cup. These are important stories to tell to get ourselves ready for the challenges this weekend.”

When asked if he coaches any differently during playoff hockey, the veteran coach was philosophical.

“I don't change too much for the playoffs other than more scouting of the teams. There's a lot more on the line, more excitement, the game can change on one play. This isn't a five-game playoff series so there's no room for error, but the main goal is to help the players develop. As I've always maintained, “Don't let winning get in the way of good coaching.”

The Junior Panthers did their fair share of winning this season due to the good coaching they received.

Their 25-14-1-3 record earned the team 76 points, an 8th-seed in the 20-team OWHL, and a playoff berth in the Gold Division. Central York's opening game matchup is with the #1-ranked team in Canada on Friday at 7 p.m. The Etobicoke Dolphins ran the table during the OWHL regular season and finished with 40 wins and 120 points. On Saturday afternoon at 1, Central York takes on the #4-ranked Whitby Wolves (6th in Canada). On Saturday evening at 8:30, the Panthers will matchup with the #5-ranked Ottawa Senators (8th in Canada).

The Panthers warmed up for the OWHL playoffs with an exhibition game in Waterloo before Easter.

Although the game versus the Ravens was a disappointment on the scoreboard, Coach Dempsey noted that the game “served a purpose.”

“We had a two-hour practice prior to getting in our cars and driving to Waterloo. We were trying to simulate the feeling of two games in a day which is what we have to do on Saturday against Whitby and Ottawa. It was good to have a bit of a letdown in an exhibition game instead of a playoff game.”

Much of the two-week break was spent healing. The Panthers have been stricken with more than their fair share of injuries this season. Coach Dempsey found that the time off was particularly beneficial for four players—Clara Williams (groin pull), Rhaea Flint (ankle sprain), Alessia Stoikos (sickness), and Avery Johnston (high ankle sprain)—who were able to rest and rehab their varied maladies in preparation for the biggest games of the season.

Coach Dempsey closed our chat by summarizing what he expected from his young Panthers at the provincials: “Stay disciplined. Stay in the moment. Play free and be the best version of yourself.”

Indeed, the Panthers will need to be the best versions of themselves when they confront the Dolphins, Wolves, and Senators at the Scotiabank Pond in Toronto on the weekend.

By Jim Stewart