

Esterbrooks? OT winner stuns Stoney Creek as Junior Panthers pull out 4-3 comeback win



Amber Esterbrooks' 20th goal of the season completed her team's improbable comeback on Sunday as the Central York Junior Panthers defeated the red-hot Stoney Creek Sabres 4-3 in overtime at SARC.

The U22 Panthers' compelling comeback?during which they fired three unanswered goals to steal the win from Stoney Creek ? was a refreshing development for the goal-starved hockey club. Central York had scored only nine goals in their prior six contests, including Saturday's 1-0 loss to the Sabres in Stoney Creek.

Sunday afternoon's matinee also featured teams that seemed to be heading in opposite directions: the Sabres rolled into SARC on an impressive 13-game heater and the Panthers had managed only one victory in their last six.

Perhaps it was the purple-taped sticks the Panthers were sporting?part of the team's pre-game ceremony that raised awareness of Mental Health initiatives?which induced some much-needed puck luck.

Perhaps it was another heroic performance by Izzy Whynot between the pipes for the Panthers, including a monster save on Sabres' top scorer Madison Burr thirteen seconds into OT, that enabled both the club's spirited third period comeback and Esterbrooks' thrilling game-winning goal in extra time.

Perhaps it was the re-emergence of prolific Panthers scorers like Buckley, Li, Degeer, Clarke, Maguire, Johnson, and Esterbrooks who were overdue for an offensive breakout and figured prominently in the wild rally that captured the imagination of a crammed SARC mezzanine and arena.

Perhaps those faithful fans witnessed what could be the turning point in the home side's season.

All these factors played a role because the hard-luck Panthers trailed 3-1 against the fourth-place Sabres with nine minutes remaining in the contest and it appeared that the Stoney Creek squad was steaming confidently towards its 14th straight win.

However, Central York reached down for something extra in the waning minutes of the game and the comeback was catalyzed at 8:28 on the power play when Erica Buckley lifted a Zoe Li pass over Sabres' goaltender Jordyn Krist to pull the Panthers to within one.

Buckley's big goal impelled her teammates to play with feverish urgency in the final five minutes and her Head Coach Steve

Dempsey pulled Izzy Whynot for the extra attacker at 2:50 to sustain the pressure on the visitors from Stoney Creek.

After a series of near misses by the Panthers, including a goalmouth scramble at 2:50 that almost yielded the equalizer when Krist lost sight agonizingly of an uncovered puck in her crease, Coach Dempsey called a timeout at 2:02 for the crucial offensive zone faceoff.

Although the Sabres cleared the zone, Captain Hannah Clarke rushed the puck up the left wing, cut powerfully behind the net, and feathered a perfect pass to Hailey Maguire who one-timed the puck in the slot past a slumping Krist to pull the Panthers even with 1:10 remaining.

Maguire's tying goal elevated the home side to the next level of play, but it took three compelling saves by Whynot in the extra period to cue the game's climactic moment.

With 2:10 left in OT and playing wide open 3-on-3 hockey that suits the Panthers' skating prowess, Avery Johnson's fine pass freed the dangerous Amber Esterbrook on a breakaway. Despite being slashed, hacked, and thwacked by the Sabres' double-shifted desperate defender Madison Burr, Esterbrook endured the nasty stick work, lifted the puck over Krist's shoulder to tickle the twine, and elicit a wild celebration that swept through the arena and into a jam-packed SARC mezzanine where fans were pressed against the plexiglass.

It was Esterbrook's 20th goal of the season and the Panthers' leading goal scorer recounted the GWG that put an end to Stoney Creek's thirteen-game winning streak.

?I was pretty tired at the end of the shift. I was getting hacked so I kinda shot it high as I saw [Krist] drop her shoulder. I was happy it went in.?

Esterbrook was pleased by the goal that extinguished the Sabres' heater.

?Stoney Creek came in here on fire with a 13-game winning streak. When McGuire scored, we played more desperately and we're a good team when we play with desperation. It was a big win for us.?

The Panthers' top goal-scorer also credited her goaltender's performance, especially in overtime.

?Izzy was keeping track of the puck really well today. She was great for us. I thought we did a good job at boxing out so Izzy could see their shots.?

She also credited the bench's role in the comeback.

?Our bench was really encouraging and loud as the game went on and that picked up our play on the ice.?

The brilliant comeback described by Esterbrooks reflected the guts and grit of the U22 Central York Panthers. Their timely victory pushed the team back into a tie for seventh place with Barrie Sharks in the OWHL playoff race. The top eight squads in the 20-team loop get an automatic bye into the Provincial championships.

The Panthers' next game is Saturday, March 2 when they visit the Toronto Aeros.

Puck drop at the Vaughan Village Sportsplex is 5:30 PM.

By Jim Stewart