

## Junior Tigers stomped 7-2 by Stouffville in OJHL season finale

The Aurora Junior Tigers finished their 2023-24 season the same way they started it?with a loss to the Stouffville Spirit.

The Tigers' regional rivals wrecked Opening Night ceremonies at the Aurora Community Centre back in September when they edged a veteran-laden home team 4-3.

The script played out similarly on Sunday, but against a very different cast of characters in Aurora jerseys at the Stouffville Arena.

The eighth-place Spirit?hurtling towards a first-round playoff series with the mighty #1 Trenton Golden Hawks?trounced the rookie-filled roster of Tigers 7-2 to end Aurora's star-crossed season.

The final score was not indicative of the first two periods of play which featured close checking, a spirited effort by the Tigers, sensational goaltending by Aurora netminder Will Goumas, and a 4-2 Stouffville lead after 40 minutes, but the final frame belonged decisively to the Spirit.

Only the valiant play of Goumas kept Stouffville from hitting double figures on the scoreboard.

Goumas made highlight reel saves throughout the contest to keep his team in the game for two periods, but the Spirit's attack was relentless in the third period in their playoff prelude.

After Stouffville's Zack Corte converted a grievous giveaway to give the Spirit a 1-0 lead at 10:44 of the first period, the Tigers evened the score with a great penalty killing effort by Keegan Decaluwe and Adam Matar.

The Tigers' captain tipped an errant power play pass at the blue line and it was off to the races with Matar creating a 2-on-1 with his linemate. Decaluwe tipped Matar's rebound past Stouffville goaltender Stephen Toltl for his 13th goal of the season.

After the Spirit hit two goal posts on the resumed power play, Julian DiMiglio one-timed a pass from Lachlan Welles that restored the Spirit's lead at 12:35.

A series of ricochets between the circles was corralled by Myles Yearwood who slid below a line of Aurora defenders and fired the puck past a sprawling Goumas with four minutes left in the first period to make it 3-1 for the Spirit.

However, with 17.4 seconds left in the opening stanza, Aurora's power play clicked when Tigers defenseman Carson Littlejohns rifled a wrist shot from the left point high blocker side past Toltl to pull the visitors within one before the first intermission. Liam Longo and Josh Frenette earned assists on Littlejohn's fourth of the season.

The tight-checking second period between two seemingly-equal teams belied the fact that the Tigers finished 33 points behind Stouffville in the OJHL standings.

Aurora's Juniors battled playoff-bound teams with a high degree of efficacy to provide hope for 2024-25. With 1:06 remaining, Goumas made another scintillating save, but Corte tipped in a pass past the sliding Aurora goaltender to restore the home side's 2-goal lead heading into the final frame.

The third period was all Stouffville, much to the delight of the 399 fans assembled. Goals by Spirit forwards Danny Thomakos, Captain Odaro Ewere, and Evan Breckles sealed the deal for the home side.

The productive Stouffville captain, who collected three points in Sunday's season finale, finished the season with 71 points based on 19 goals and 52 assists, placing 15th in the OJHL scoring race. Ewere's Spirit squad swept the four-game season series against the

Tigers with 4-3, 7-3, 4-3, and 7-2 victories.

#### Closing Season Notes

Last season, Tigers' Captain Lucas Stanojevic placed 25th in the OJHL scoring race and led Aurora with 33 goals, 28 assists, and 61 points in 54 games.

Stanojevic was traded to the Toronto Junior Canadiens just before the 2023-24 preseason began in a shocking move that foreshadowed the trading of top-flight Tigers talent to divisional rivals JRC and Trenton.

This season, Tigers' rookie forward Frank Castiglione led the Tigers in scoring with 13 goals and 21 assists for 34 points in 47 games. Castiglione, a talented power forward on a very young team, benefitted from playing for a half-season alongside high-scoring linemates Ethan Lindsay and Ryan Evenhuis before the productive forwards were traded to the Toronto Junior Canadiens.

Evenhuis, the Tigers' leading scorer at the time of the trade, was in 10th place in scoring in the OJHL prior to being shipped to JRC. Lindsay, the hard-checking newly-appointed Captain of the Tigers after Stanojevic was traded, finished the season with 50 points on season splits between Aurora and JRC.

**By Jim Stewart**