

Panthers edge Tigers 6-4 in the Battle of the Big Cats at the ?ACC Jungle?

The struggling Aurora Tigers let a 4-3 third period lead slip away against division rival Pickering Panthers in a tough 6-4 loss at the ACC on Saturday night.

The Panthers?the OJHL defending champions ? fired three unanswered goals in the final ten minutes to improve their record to 24-16-1-0.

Pickering forward Ethan Toms scored the game winner into a wide-open cage after corralling a bad bounce off the end boards that eluded Tiger goaltender Claudio Ardellini.

Toms' tally put Pickering up 5-4 and the Panthers added an empty netter with 10.8 seconds to provide the margin of victory.

Aurora headed into the third period with a 3-2 lead.

Tigers Captain and OJHL All-Star Lucas Stanojevic fired his 28th goal of the season on a snapshot past Panther goalie Andrew Ballantyne with 5.56 remaining in the second period. Stanojevic's goal picked up the Tigers' pace of play and they dominated the balance of the period. However, a constant parade to the penalty box jeopardized the precarious lead.

Tigers netminder Claudio Ardellini made four acrobatic saves in the waning minutes of the period to preserve the one-goal margin and pick up his penalty killers. The diminutive, dynamic goalie made 11 saves in the frame.

The Panthers tied the game 3-3 on Ryan Johnston's power play goal at 16.43 of the third period, but the resilient Tigers rallied to retake the lead while playing four-on-four. Aurora forward Matthew Godwin finished a pretty pass from Carter Real to put the Tigers back on top 4-3, but the sixth-place squad surrendered goals to Panthers Alex Papaspyropoulos and Ethan Toms in a span of three minutes.

Trailing 5-4, Tigers Head Coach Greg Johnston called a timeout and pulled Ardellini with 2:04 remaining. The strategy gave the Tigers power play a two-skater advantage with Panther leading scorer and projected NHL draft #117 Aron Jessli serving his third penalty of the game.

Coach Johnson was disappointed by his power play unit's effort at this pivotal point in the game and maintained that his team's ?6-on-4 effort had to be better and we needed to skate for the full 60 minutes tonight.?

The former NHLer did single out the fine play of his netminder ? ?Claudio was really good tonight? ? and acknowledged that Ardellini's multiple point-blank saves in the first period helped his teammates recover from a shaky start.

The Tigers bench boss remained gracious in defeat and upbeat in tone despite the team's recent string of losses, but noted the vital importance of a big bounce-back win in Brantford versus the 99ers (5-36-0-2) on Sunday afternoon: ?Every game is big for us at this point of the season. Those two points we have to have.?

Game Notes:

The Tigers-Panthers game was played in front of a raucous crowd of 250 fans who were treated to an entertaining, penalty-filled tilt at the ACC.

Pickering's second-leading scorer Eli Pilosof and OJHL Northwest Conference Player of the Month in December did not suit up for the Panthers due to an undisclosed injury.

Panthers' leading scorer Aron Jesli's power play marker at 12.37 of the second period was his 17th of the season.

Sett Ursomarzo (14) and Jace Lavalee (6) also scored for the Tigers versus the Panthers.

Saturday night's loss dropped the sixth-place Tigers' record to 15-19-2-4

By Jim Stewart