

Young Tigers earn a point in a hard-fought double overtime 4-3 loss to Stouffville

Odaro Ewere scored the winning goal at 6:12 during the second overtime period to lead the Stouffville Spirit to a 4-3 victory over the Aurora Tigers at the ACC on Thursday afternoon.

In a rare OJHL weekday matinee, the young and improving Tigers earned their third point in three games during which they have accrued a 1-1-1 record. They also had their best flurry of offense in months by scoring three goals in six minutes in the third period, thus revealing the team's scoring potential.

Goals were at a premium in the first two periods of play in this contest between regional rivals.

Defenseman Nathan Twohey's power play goal at 8:38 of the second period broke a scoreless deadlock and Stouffville spirited their 1-0 lead to the dressing room after 40 minutes of play.

The teams exploded for five goals in the final frame, four of which were scored in a three-minute offensive outburst.

Tigers' forward Max Cervjakovs tied the game three minutes into the third period with Jace Lavallee and Liam Longo earning assists on the swift-skating Latvian's fourth goal of the season. 80 seconds later, Andoni Fimis restored the visitors' one-goal lead, but the young Tigers responded confidently to the challenge. 37 seconds after Fimis scored for Stouffville, Tigers' leading scorer Frank Castiglione fired his 12th goal of his rookie campaign to tie the game with helpers going to Michael Schiavone and Keegan Decaluwe.

Exactly one minute later, rookie Tigers forward Josh Frenette tallied the home team's third goal in six minutes to take a 3-2 lead. Frenette's fifth of his rookie campaign, assisted by Cervjakovs and Carson Littlejohn, showed the rookie-laden team's offensive promise as the free-wheeling Tigers turned in their most productive third period performance in months.

Alas, the young squad could not hold the lead and Spirit forward Charles Vanhaverbeke scored at 13:02 to pull Stouffville into a 3-3 tie and force overtime.

Despite the heartbreaking loss in double-overtime, Tigers Captain Keegan Decaluwe remained upbeat, especially with his team's flurry of goals in the third period.

"We were clicking all game and we were creating chances in the first and second periods, too. The guys were getting down about all the missed opportunities, but we kept working and when Max got the first one, it started a good streak of goals for us."

Captain Decaluwe complimented Cervjakovs's skill as displayed against Stouffville: "Max sees the ice so well and better than most players. He's fast and silky."

Decaluwe also noted the recent improved performance of the team.

"We had a really tough stretch in the schedule, but being back home has really helped us. Our coaches have been harping on details at practice and we're learning to play properly within the systems in place. We're young guys that are trying to get better every game."

The young Tigers captain also applauded the recent efforts on and off the ice of rookie netminder Yianni Karkoulas who turned aside 33 of Stouffville's 37 shots and was voted Second Star of the Game by OJHL staff.

"With Yianni, it all starts in the room. He's a great guy?an excellent teammate. He doesn't get too high and he doesn't get too low. His athleticism is insane. He's going to be a dynamite Junior A goalie. I've been trying to beat him glove side in practice all season

and I bet I've only put three by him in five months.?

To illustrate Captain Decaluwe's assessment, fans are invited to watch on the OJHL website Karkoulas's glove save at 7:51 of the second period to thwart a 2-on-1 break by the Spirit. It was a stop to savor and will be a candidate for the Top 5 Plays of 2023-24.

The Tigers host St. Michael's on Friday, February 9 and the North York Rangers on Saturday, February 10. Both games start at 7.30 p.m. at the ACC.

By Jim Stewart