

25th annual Silver Stick Tournament opens and closes with vivid on-ice colours and international flare



Mayor Tom Mrakas, Councillor and Sport Aurora President Ron Weese, and Central York Girls Hockey Association President Mark Dubeau graced the red carpet and opened the 25th Annual Silver Stick Hockey Tournament on Friday afternoon at the Aurora Community Centre.

President Dubeau welcomed the guests assembled, including two teams from California, that took part in the on-ice festivities. Mayor Mrakas refereed the ceremonial puck drop and the 60-team international tournament was opened officially.

There was an element of pageantry to the Opening Ceremonies with both American teams and both Panther squads assembled along the blue lines for the national anthems and an exchange of cultural items such as pins and flags.

A lively, colourful spray of orange and black, royal blue and yellow, navy blue and red, and white and red jerseys lit up the venerable hockey rink which played host to the multilevel tournament whose organizers and participants celebrated its 25th year of promoting girls hockey.

The opening ceremonies also featured a sentimental three-generational Panther moment as Don Bailkowski, Christine Reir (nee Bailkowski), and Josephine Reier were introduced to the ACC crowd.

Don is a long-time, dedicated Silver Stick volunteer. His daughter, Christine, and her husband, Mike, were the Junior Panther coaches prior to Steve Dempsey becoming Head Coach of the U22 Elite squad.

Notably, Christine was a NCAA Division 1 defender and right winger at Clarkson University. Her daughter, Josephine, currently plays for the U11A Panthers. The trio was welcomed warmly by an appreciative ACC crowd.

A pair of Central York Panthers games sandwiched the Opening Ceremonies at the ACC. Prior to the Mayor's puck drop, the U15A Panthers defeated the California Goldrush 3-1. The local U15A squad went on to finish second in Pool C with a 2-1 record.

After the Opening Ceremonies, the U11A Panthers hosted the Anaheim Lady Ducks. The powerful American squad with the distinctive burnt orange uniforms skated to a convincing 3-0 victory over the home side. Their game plan was clearly to shoot high on diminutive Panthers goaltender Lily Gordon who was up to the aerial challenge from the strong-skating Californians. The U11 Panthers were outshot by a wide margin in the three-goal loss, but Gordon's performance between the pipes was inspirational and her athleticism was impressive. The Ducks went on to win the tournament's U11A championship, defeating the North Halton Twisters in the final 3-0.

The highlight for the Central York Girls Hockey Association at the 2024 Silver Stick was the U15BB Panthers' defeat of the

Sudbury Lady Wolves 1-0 in the championship final. Other Silver Stick champions included the U11AA Burlington Barracudas (3-2 win over Clarington Flames); the U11BB Whitby Wolves (2-1 win over Ayr Rockets); the U15A Barrie Sharks (3-1 win over Peterborough Ice Kats); and the U15A Ottawa Senators (2-1 win over Bluewater Hawks).

The climactic event of the tournament was the U22 Central York Panthers' 1-0 win over the Mississauga Hurricanes.

The OWHL showcase game was part of the Silver Stick Tournament's Closing Ceremonies at SARC on Sunday afternoon. Izzy Whynot earned her fourth shutout of the season with a 28-save performance and Amber Esterbrooks tallied the game-winning goal in the second period to lead the Junior Panthers (20-9-1-2) to victory. It was Esterbrooks' 18th goal of the season.

The regular season game entertained over 200 fans and showcased the rich hockey culture that the Panthers have built in Aurora.

For all the tournament results, please visit this website: silverstick.org/Tournaments/21292. **By Jim Stewart**