

A season-end interview with Aurora Tigers? Owner and Governor Jim Thomson

It's been a turbulent season in Tiger Town and team owner Jim Thomson made headlines last week when he announced that his General Manager of two years, Sierra Costa, would be leaving the OJHL organization.

During a phone interview on Friday afternoon, Thomson provided context for Costa's end-of-season departure.

?It was a mutual decision where it was Sierra's time to move on?she's looking at different opportunities. She did a great job for us to build our roster and then un-build it when we made the decision to make the team younger and trade our older players to contenders. Sierra's departure was not a results-based decision.?

Thomson applauded Costa's managerial qualities as demonstrated during her two-year career with the Tigers.

?Sierra is a wonderful young lady?organized, prepared, professional. The PWHL should take note of this young lady's commitment, hard work, and determination. There would be some great opportunities for Sierra in the PWHL.?

Although Thomson's General Manager is leaving the organization, the former Los Angeles King is retaining his entire coaching staff.

Comprised of Head Coach Thomas Milne, Assistant Coach and Goalie Coach Dave Goverde, and Assistant Coaches James Thomson and Darcy Roy, this quartet of coaches soldiered bravely through what Shakespeare once described as a ?winter of discontent.?

Thomson explained his decision: ?Our agreement with the coaching staff was to develop during tough times. Tom Milne's experience and success in the OJHL?his ability to develop systems and a team culture?are important skills for our Head Coach going forward. We'll reload our roster with a fresh start for the entire staff. It's similar to having Patrick Roy come in mid-season to coach a struggling Islanders club and staying to start a new season in the Fall to create a fresh start with his hockey club.?

The fresh start will be welcomed by the young Tigers players who were thrown into a cauldron at Christmas, including Carson Littlejohn and Josh Frenette. Both players were prized acquisitions in the blockbuster trade that saw Tigers' leading scorer Ryan Evenhuis and Captains Peter Lopes and Ethan Lindsay sent to the contending Toronto Junior Canadiens.

Thomson noted that ?Both Carson and Josh needed the opportunity to develop which they weren't going to get in Toronto.?

?Both players will be crucial parts of the team, along with Matar, Oletic, Baston, Cervjakovs, Rispin, Longo, Castiglione, and Schiavone who all improved during a tough season. They all got their reps and experience. We're expecting this core to be good?to create opportunities to win every game.?

Thomson added that his current and projected roster of the 2024-25 Tigers will be a playoff contender:

?This group gets us to the playoffs and we want to develop these kids into scholarship candidates. Getting these kids exposure to NCAA and USports schools will be a big focus for us. In ten years, we've secured over 30 scholarships for USports and NCAA Division 1 or Division 3 schools. Three of our current players are in the process of committing to NCAA scholarships.?

Although it was one of the most challenging seasons in his decade of Tigers ownership, Thomson still relishes the opportunity to enter the Aurora Community Centre and be a central part of a hockey team's culture.

?Being a hockey player all my life, I still enjoy walking into the arena and being part of a team. It's satisfying seeing the kids play a lot?our young men had a lot of wins away from the wins column this past season. Only one team lifts the Buckland Cup.

?What did we do after 56 games to help this young group develop? It was so rewarding to see them go through and endure a tough season. There was lots of learning from the losses and the team got stronger as they fought through adversity. There was so much learning by this group and so much growth as they were challenged in so many hockey games by older teams. These were life lessons about development that they will need in a workplace someday.?

One of the most pleasing developments that Thomson noted was the stability provided by 6'5" call-up goaltender Christopher Thompson who transitioned seamlessly from the PJHL Schomberg Cougars to the OJHL Tigers.

?Chris came in as a 19-year-old goaltender. He helped stabilize the roster position with his size and agility. Chris will be working with Goaltending Coach Dave Coverde during the offseason. He steadied the team during a really tough stretch of the schedule and made the team more competitive. Based on his work during the last month of the season, Chris deserves the opportunity to earn the #1 goaltending position on next year's team.?

The 2023-24 Tigers finished eleventh in the OJHL's 12-team Eastern Conference with a 13-37-2-4 record for 32 points?four points behind the 10th-place Pickering Panthers and a distant 29 points behind 8th-place Stouffville who claimed the final playoff spot.

The 2024-25 Tigers will need to make a 30-point improvement from season to season to achieve their goal to be playoff contenders.

By Jim Stewart