

Are you ready for the Tigers Aurora? Season opens this weekend

It might be hard to believe, but junior hockey is back in town.

The Ontario Junior Hockey League, kicks off the 2022/2023 season this week with the first game of the year seeing the Milton Menace visit the Caledon Admirals on Thursday night at Mayfield Arena.

The hometown Aurora Tigers open their campaign on the road in Markham against the Royals Friday night, before coming home for their first game of the year at the Aurora Community Centre, in a back-to-back against Markham.

Last season, it was exciting to be a Tigers fan. The boys made the playoffs despite being swept by the Collingwood Blues in a best-of-three series.

When Greg Johnston came in behind the bench, everything had changed. Practices were different. The mentality of all the players seemed to have shifted seismically. There was a unique energy in the room, and one that was part of last year's success.

And now, there is a different energy even heading into this season. For the first time in Canadian Junior Hockey League history, the Tigers hired Sierra Costa to be the league's first female general manager. And she's been quite busy, in fact.

"I think the biggest thing is our leadership group. It's a different culture. I believe that culture will resonate better in a playoff run. Connor Van Weelie takes over as captain. He's a terrific hockey player and a terrific leader. Puts the team before himself and cares more about wins than he does points," said Team Governor, Jim Thomson.

Lee Chiang, who finished second in team scoring joined the Markham Royals this offseason and will face his former club right away. He joins defenceman Logan Boutros, who also made the move to join the Royals.

Former captain Luc Reeve, Hollander Thompson and Tommy Kloepfer all joined Ohio University's hockey program to continue their young careers.

Other notable mentions that are inactive on the team's roster sheet is last year's leading scorer Justin Biraben, Wolfgang Govederis, Jett McCullum, Anthony Drekopoulos, William Moore, Ty Roberts and Nick Lamont.

A few new names have come in, including goaltender Mason Meyer, who replaces Nolan Boyd on the back end, from the Fort Frances Lakers of the Superior International Junior Hockey League.

The Lakeville, Minn., native posted just shy over a .900 save percentage in the league last season.

Some other notable names that are currently new to the roster are 6-foot-7 defenceman Christian Holden, Ryan Evanhuis from the Kirkland Lake Gold Miners, Khaden Henry from the Markham Royals and Bolton native and #185 pick in the 2021 OHL draft Adamo Zingaro.

Other names to mention, in part from last season are Aurora native Lucas Vacca, Connor Russo, Deandres de Jesus, former Toronto Patriots forward Joseph Martino, Jonah Ziskinder, Jack Seney, Ethan Nobes, Jace Lavallee, Tyson Doucette, Zander Hutchinson, Noah Desantis and Zennon Edwards.

"We're really happy with our group. We have a talented team that we think will be one or two in our division. We're excited with the talent pool," Thomson said.

Player turnover in the OJHL is most certainly not uncommon. As a matter of fact, it is the very vessel that carries this league. New

opportunities come in for players, following the ones who have already shined in the past.

Without it, there would not be many chances for young players seeking to make names for themselves. And also, not very many opportunities to grow as a player and commit to schools or to other leagues to advance their careers.

Behind the bench, the Tigers said goodbye to former assistant coach Robert Powers and Joseph Piccone. Former Los Angeles Kings netminder David Goverde takes over as assistant coach along with assistant coach/strength and conditioning coach Andrew Shipley.

Elvis Stojko is the skating coach, Jenn Vaicunas is the lead therapist, Clayton McConnell is the equipment manager with Stephan Perron as the assistant equipment manager.

Vivienne Bridgeford is in the box office, Linda Terry is in the front office, Alex Di Sera is scoreboard and sound, Stu Parker is the team assistant and Steve Mitchell is the videographer.

In the physio and mental side, this year's mental health coach is Clarissa Smith, physiotherapist Brenda Lantz, university/educational advisor is Jennifer Blake, team doctor is Dr. Patrick Gamble, player assistant advisor is Donny Lantz and the social media manager is Rayne Elson.

Along with returning Tigers Van Weelie, Peter Lopes, Lucas Stanojevic, Ethan McFarland, Sett Ursomarzo, Tomasz Szczerba, Matthew Godwin, Matteo Iacovelli and goaltender Glen Crandall, this is your 2022/2023 Aurora Tigers.

By Robert Belardi