

Aurora Tigers eliminated from Buckland Cup playoffs in 5-1 loss to Georgetown Raiders

The hockey gods owed the Aurora Tigers better puck luck on Friday night after three hard-fought playoff losses to divisional rival Georgetown Raiders. The Tigers pulled out all the stops to stave off elimination, "battled hard" according to their captain Lucas Stanojevic, and hoped for some "Luck of the Irish" on St. Patrick's Day.

However, Georgetown prevailed 5-1 in front of 300 fans at the ACC and swept Aurora from the OJHL playoffs.

Classy in defeat, Stanojevic assessed his team's efforts in a series which was much closer than what appeared on the surface.

"We battled our hardest. The number one thing is we always worked hard in all four games. The first three games were so close. Unfortunately, tonight wasn't as close. The first two games were tough losses—one in double-overtime and the other with 5 seconds left in the game. We had leads in every game except tonight."

The Tigers' top scorer—who finished tied for 10th in the OJHL with 33 goals—credited his goaltender Glen Crandall with great work all season and in the playoff series against Georgetown. The big netminder—who finished fourth in the OJHL with 1240 saves and a 3.22 GAA— even stopped a crucial penalty shot in Game 4.

"Glen was in there battling for us and he had a great Game 1 in Georgetown."

Crandall stopped 57 shots in the Tigers' Game 1 Double-Overtime loss to the Raiders.

On Friday night, the Raiders opened the scoring on Aydin Parekh's power play goal at 3:56 assisted by Andrew Della Rovere. The first period featured end-to-end action, lots of shots from the perimeter, and Crandall standing tall in the Aurora net to keep the Tigers' deficit at one.

Speedy Tiger forward Jace Lavallee's narrow misfire on a breakaway with 1:40 left in the period turned out to be an unfortunate turning point for Aurora. The bad puck luck turned into an opportunity for Raider Kaleb Nelson who corralled a bouncing puck in the neutral zone, generated his own breakaway, and slid one past Crandall with just over a minute left in the first frame to give the Raiders a 2-0 lead.

The Tigers were handed a game-altering opportunity just 25 seconds into the second period when the Raiders' Will Preto was called for high sticking, but Aurora's power play found itself on its heels as Georgetown generated three short-handed scoring opportunities—all repelled by Crandall.

Georgetown carried the play for most of the second frame and took a 3-0 lead when Nolan Underwood deftly converted a centering pass from Aydin Parekh at 15:51.

Crandall's acrobatic saves on point blank shots, especially at 8:03 on Della Rovere, kept Aurora in the game, but Kristian Lamanna's short-handed goal that he roofed under the crossbar with 2:23 left in the period gave the visitors a commanding 4-0 lead.

In the final frame, Crandall made a big breakaway save on Andrew Della Rovere at 10:18. On the play, triple jeopardy ensued as Tiger defenseman Alex Case was assessed a 5-minute slashing major, a game misconduct, and Della Rovere was awarded a penalty shot on the slash. However, Crandall repelled Della Rovere again with another athletic save to keep the possibility of a Tigers' St. Patrick's Day miracle comeback in order.

Thoughts of a comeback were scuttled by Lamanna's second goal of the game for the Raiders—this time on the power play—and Georgetown bumped their lead to 5-0 at 8:53.

The Tigers, to their credit, kept skating and veteran Aurora forward Matthew Godwin provided some solace for the big home crowd when he banged in a rebound at 5:28 off Sett Ursomarzo's nice off-wing rush. The goal featured an equal display of Godwin's speed and Ursomarzo's skill and reduced Georgetown's lead to 5-1, but that was as close the Tigers could get to stave off elimination from the Buckland Cup playoffs.

The Tigers found themselves on the brink of elimination following their 7-4 loss in Georgetown on Wednesday.

The final score was not indicative of how close Game 3 was and it encapsulated this series "full of heartbreak" for the Tigers.

For the third game in a row, the Tigers scratched and clawed their way versus the Raiders.

Tying goals by Tigers Jonah Ziskinder and Jace Lavalee led to a 2-2 tie after one period.

Aurora held a 4-2 lead on the home team five minutes into the second period on goals by Lucas Stanojevic and Matthew Godwin and the teams fought to a 4-4 tie after two periods.

Georgetown scored the game winner five minutes into the third period, but clung to its one-goal lead for 13 more minutes until scoring a pair of empty-net goals in the final 90 seconds of play.

The shots on goal "which favoured Aurora 46-44" showed how even the play was between these divisional rivals, yet it was Georgetown who toted a 3-game series lead into Game 4 at the ACC for the St. Patrick's Day Tilt with the Tigers.

After the St. Patrick's Day Tilt, Captain Stanojevic discussed the highlights of 2022-23. He noted the season "in which the Tigers finished in seventh place in the tough Northwest Conference-- was full of "ups and downs."

"We beat a lot of good teams ahead of us in the standings and it was all about those kinds of W's. Winning 7-6 in Overtime in our home opener was a good memory for the team."

Stanojevic noted that he is looking forward to returning next year as "Captain of the Tigers in 2023-24" and mentioned in closing that "It will be an honor to lead the team for another season."

The ACC "Jungle" is, indeed, lucky to have such an excellent "King."

Season-Ending Notes:

It was fitting that Matthew Godwin scored Aurora's final goal of 2022-23. It was the speedy, playmaking forward's last game as a Tiger after 3 seasons and 85 OJHL games with the club.

The Tigers' three 2023 graduates "Godwin, Joseph Martino, and Noah DeSantis" were honored in the team's St. Patrick's Day program. DeSantis was a four-year Tiger while Godwin and Martino were three-year Tigers. As Tiger forwards, Martino tallied 21 goals and 12 assists in his 78 games with Aurora while Godwin scored 12 and assisted on 42 in his 85 games. Defenseman Noah DeSantis played 92 games for the Tigers and scored 5 goals and earned 30 assists.

In their final season with the Tigers, DeSantis scored 3 goals and 21 assists in 44 games played; Godwin scored 2 goals and 20 assists in 31 games played; Martino scored 7 goals and 3 assists in 24 games played.

By Jim Stewart