

Buffalo Junior Sabres edge Aurora 2-1 in Tigers' home finale

The Junior Sabres looked remarkably like their NHL counterparts in their vintage blue and gold Buffalo jerseys and edged the Aurora Tigers 2-1 on Saturday night at the ACC.

It was the Tigers' final regular season home game and the proud franchise will miss the playoffs for only the sixth time in 40 years. A stunning sequence of events in the Autumn—including the firing of Head Coach Greg Johnston and the trading or waiving of the team's seven top-performing players to JRC, Trenton, Brantford, and Caledon—induced a freefall.

The Junior Tigers plummeted from being a playoff-bound 7th seed to an 11th seed that currently sits 27 points out of the final Eastern Conference playoff spot held by their regional rivals in Stouffville.

The congenial Coach Johnston took in the game on Saturday night and what he witnessed was a gritty performance by a young Tigers team that would have been almost unrecognizable to the former NHLer.

Call-up goalie Christopher Thompson, a core of promising rookies, and a wee group of plucky Tiger veterans not jettisoned in the Fall put forth another entertaining home ice effort.

The game that Coach Johnston witnessed also had a very colorful NHL 1970s vibe to it with the blue and gold clad Buffalo Sabres skating against the hometown Tigers sporting their familiar gold and purple LA Kings-inspired jerseys.

A spectrum of colours adorned the venerable arena's ice surface, evoking memories of Buffalo's "French Connection" and LA's "Triple Crown" lines, respectively.

But this was the here and now and, as has been the case over the last few weeks, Aurora rookie netminder Christopher Thompson kept the Tigers in the game, stopping all fifteen Sabre shots he faced in the first period.

The fourth-place Sabres (31-18-0-4) stepped on to the ACC ice surface brimming with confidence—winners of four of their last five games—but the Tigers (13-36-2-4) battled the American squad to a scoreless first period tie.

The young Tigers skated with the playoff-bound Sabres to start the second, but nine minutes into the middle frame, Buffalo's Cameron Doran took a pass from Tyler Isherwood and whistled a wrist shot from the circles that beat Thompson short side high to put the visitors up 1-0.

At the end of the middle frame, Buffalo had outshot Aurora 25-10, but Thompson repeatedly frustrated the Sabres.

The Tigers finally lit the lamp at 4:42 of the third period.

Captain Keegan Decaluwe trapped a puck at the blue line, fed Adam Matar on the right wing who made a power forward move to the Buffalo net and feathered a perfect pass to Jace Lavallee who one-timed it past Sabre goalie Aiden McKenna. The tying goal was Lavallee's 10th of the season.

While playing 4 on 4 with Aurora's Tyler Oletic and Buffalo's Danny Phalen in the box, Sabres' forward Michael Kull completed a perfect 2-on-1 breakout with Isherwood to give the visitors a 2-1 lead at 11:42.

With Thompson pulled for an extra attacker, Tigers Coach Tom Milne called a timeout with 45.3 seconds left to execute an O-Zone play and procure the equalizer.

Josh Frenette's overtime hero versus the North York Rangers two weekends ago—executed Coach Milne's plan and swept in from the

right wing and beat McKenna cleanly with a powerful wrist shot.

Unfortunately, the puck clanged off the outside of the right goal post with 4.5 seconds left and the Sabres escaped the ACC with a narrow victory to report to Customs Officials at Fort Erie.

Tigers' Captain Keegan Decaluwe was undaunted by defeat.

The stand-up leader credited a number of factors for the team's incremental improvements on home ice over the last month.

?We had a lot of fans out here tonight for our last game so we wanted to give them an entertaining game. We've been a lot better structurally over the last ten games. Our PK looks a lot better, too, and we're sustaining injuries on the PK blocking shots. That shows the guys playing hard for their teammates right to the end of the season.?

Captain Decaluwe praised his goaltender who put forth another strong performance on home ice.

?Chris has thrown everything he has into our games. He's a hard worker at practice, too. Chris has worked closely with our goalie Coach Dave Goverde and he's killing it right now.?

Another Tiger that killed it on Saturday night was the swift-skating Jace Lavallee who earned the OJHL's Second Star of the Game. Decaluwe observed that ?Lavallee was flying all night. He's playing hard for the team and created so many dangerous 2 on 1's tonight. Matar made a great power move to set up Jace's goal, too.?

Decaluwe's Tigers wrap up their OJHL season on Sunday, March 3 when they take on the 8th-place Spirit (26-19-2-5) in Stouffville at 2.30 p.m.

By JIM STEWART