

Captain Lucas Stanojevic leads the Aurora Tigers into the 2023-24 OJHL Season



It was a humid July evening at Newmarket's Magna Centre—one not suited seemingly for thoughts of hockey, but second-year Aurora Captain Lucas Stanojevic is only two hours from taking to the ice with his Tigers teammates as a key part of the OJHL squad's summer incarnation.

The Junior A Tigers have been playing together in a Men's League as part of their diligent on-ice preparation for their 2023-24 OJHL season. In our pre-game interview in the mezzanine overlooking the ice surface, Stanojevic, who finished tied for tenth last year in goals scored in the 21-team league, disclosed that nine forwards and six defensemen from the Tigers' current roster play on Wednesday nights to get the jump on the new season.

The native of Ajax, ON, acknowledges that "this year, making the playoffs won't be good enough."

"We need to be a team to be reckoned with—to scare other teams. We need to make it very difficult for opposing teams to play the Aurora Tigers. Our goal is to be at least a Top 3 team in our newly-aligned East Conference."

The 12-team East Conference features the Tigers, Cobourg Cougars, Haliburton County Huskies, Lindsay Muskies, Markham Royals, North York Rangers, Pickering Panthers, St. Michael's Buzzers, Stouffville Spirit, Toronto Junior Canadiens, Trenton Golden Hawks, and Wellington Dukes.

During the off-season, the OJHL expanded to 24 teams. The League welcomed back the Buffalo Junior Sabres after a two-year absence and added two expansion teams—the Leamington Flyers and the Niagara Falls Canucks—to the new West Conference.

The other nine franchises in the 12-team conference are the Brantford 99ers, Burlington Cougars, Caledon Admirals, Collingwood Blues, Georgetown Raiders, Milton Menace, Mississauga Chargers, Oakville Blades, and Toronto Patriots. Teams will play 56 games, up from 54 in 2022-23. The National Championships will be hosted by the Oakville Blades in May 2024 and the 5'11", 190 pound forward asserts that his Tigers want to be one of the OJHL's two representatives.

Stanojevic—who tallied 33 goals and 27 assists in 54 games for the Tigers last season—noted that the team needs to improve to achieve this goal and he needs to "elevate my game, too."

I need to be a model at practice for the guys and to push them."

Part of this push comes on the ice at the Magna Centre on a muggy night in July, but it also occurs off-ice as the team's returning captain.

?I have a big responsibility to create a cohesive unit and to create a good atmosphere in the room so that my teammates love being an Aurora Tiger.?

It's evident that Aurora's captain loves being a Tiger and is looking forward to creating a winning culture in his final year of Junior A Hockey with Assistant Captains Peter Lopes and Ryan Evenhuis as leadership partners.

Stanojevic has played hockey with Lopes for six years and refers to the team's power play quarterback as ?My #1 guy to rely on in the room. Peter is huge in the community, too, representing the Tigers at the Street Festival and dedicating himself to so many charity fundraisers in Town. On the ice, he is a great leader and player?a rock on the blue line with so much presence.?

In addition to praising the role of Lopes on and off the ice for the Tigers, Stanojevic lavished praise on the veteran presence of Assistant Captain Evenhuis.

?Ryan and I trained together before he joined the Tigers last year after playing a year in the NOJHL. Ryan's been around junior hockey and he works really hard. He makes all the extra efforts on the ice and is another leader in our dressing room that the guys can look up to. He's an amazing, two-way player who has a big eye for the net. Ryan's older and stronger so he'll take the extra step this year, too.?

With all three captains back in the fold in Aurora jerseys for 2023-24, 60 per cent of last year's very effective top power play unit is intact.

?Having these specific guys with me for a second season will be a huge advantage in terms of handling the dressing room. It's a really important factor for us. It's a big plus for the team, especially with a number of new players joining us.?

Although the roster will have some degree of turnover to it, Stanojevic noted that two key players that are also returning are gritty forwards Connor Russo and Stefan Forgione:

?They are two big parts to this year's team. They'll do anything to win?dive face first to block shots, deliver big checks. There's so much grit there. ?Forgee' took a big step last year and so did Connor. They scored some big goals, too. The difference between first year and second year in the OJHL will be so beneficial for both these motivated guys. They know that you don't need a letter to be a leader in the room.?

In addition to Russo and Forgione, the Aurora captain noted the return of speedy Jace Lavalee for a full season.

?Love to see Lavalee back, too. He's such a great skater and he's a breakaway threat every time he's on the ice.?

In addition to lauding the return of the core group of Tigers and setting team goals together, the OJHL veteran took time to reflect on his previous two years in Aurora and noted some personal goals for 2023-24.

?Time has flown by over the last two years and going into my last junior season, I need to take advantage of the moment and embrace every single game. Last season went really well for me in terms of production and I need to do that again to help the team. I need to smash that bar from last year and create a new one. My goal is to get an NCAA Division 1 Scholarship at the end of the hockey season so I can continue my education and play hockey at a high level.?

It is clear in our conversation that Captain Lucas Stanojevic is committed to the lofty goals of his Aurora Tigers and has set high standards for himself for the 2023-24 season and beyond. The team's Opening Weekend?which will feature a home-and-home series against their regional rival the Stouffville Spirit?is scheduled for September 7-10.

This is the first of a series of preseason articles in The Auroran based on the Aurora Tigers' upcoming OJHL season. Next week, we

will be interviewing Team President Jim Thomson.

By Jim Stewart