

Central York Panthers earn their way to top-seed in the Elite League ?Final Four? with pristine round-robin record

The Central York Panthers entered the U22 Elite League Championship Weekend with high hopes on Friday.

The Aurora-based hockey team was coming off an excellent regular season. The Panthers finished second in the East Division with a 28-10-5 record and were playing their best hockey of the 2022-23 season in March.

The momentum from the OWHL regular season carried over to their Elite playoffs in Toronto this weekend as the Panthers glided through the preliminary round. They defeated the Mississauga Hurricanes 3-0, the Etobicoke Dolphins 3-1, and the Kitchener Rangers 4-1. Their perfect record and a goal differential of +8 earned them the top seed in the Final Four, a bye through the quarterfinals, and an automatic berth in the medal round.

Unfortunately, the top-seeded Panthers' drive to the U22 Elite championship stalled in the semi-final on Sunday in a hard-fought 3-1 loss to the Whitby Wolves. In the bronze medal game, the Panthers were edged 2-0 by the Durham West Lightning. For the second consecutive season, the Panthers had to settle for a fourth-place finish at the prestigious Elite Championship tournament. The 6th-ranked Panthers will recalibrate this week after the tough losses to Whitby and Durham West and shift their focus on winning an Ontario Championship. They will compete in the Provincials on April 13-16.

Despite the tough losses on Sunday, the weekend was filled with excellent achievements by the talented OWHL squad. The Panthers' play in the round robin was stellar, including their Game 1 win versus the Mississauga Hurricanes.

Named after larger-than-life Mississauga Mayor Hazel ?Hurricane? McCallion, the Hurricanes were ranked #4 in the province and defeated the Panthers 5-3 in December. However, the Panthers avenged that early-season loss by shutting down the league's leading scorer Kahlen Lamarche and Team Canada U18 player Charlotte Pieckenhagen.

After a scoreless first period and many excellent saves by Panther netminder Brooke Vaccari, Central York opened up the scoring at 2:09 on a nifty deflection by Kaitlin Teixeira on a slip pass from Cheyenne Degeer. Mikayla Cranney buried the Panthers' second goal in the third to create some breathing room against a pressing and desperate Hurricanes' team. Down 2-0, Mississauga pulled their goalie.

However, all the Hurricanes' last-minute attempts were turned away by Vaccari. Kayla Kondo?the Panthers' leading scorer during the regular season with 45 points?scored into an empty net to make it Central York 3-Mississauga 0.

In Game 2 versus Etobicoke, the Panthers lugged in an ugly 1-2 season record versus the Dolphins and had been outscored 8-1 in the three contests. However, the Panthers came out flying versus the #8-ranked team in Ontario and applied early pressure against their nemesis.

Midway through the first period, the Panthers' power play capitalized on their first opportunity when Ella Newman-Mixon pounded home a juicy rebound only ten seconds into the extra-skater advantage. The second period was a penalty-filled affair with the Panthers being the benefactor of the Dolphins' rambunctious play. Two power play goals by Degeer and Kondo put the Panthers up 3-0 heading into the second intermission. In the third period, the Panthers' penalty-kill unit was tested often.

After killing the front-half of a 5-on-3, the Dolphins wouldn't be denied and got on the board with a late PP marker. The momentum shifted in favour of the Dolphins, but the Panthers were able to weather the storm and hang on for the 3-1 victory over Etobicoke.

Game 3 of the Round Robin featured a battle with the Kitchener-Waterloo Rangers and their 18U Team Canada scoring sensation Caitlyn Kraemer. The national hero fired 10 goals at the recent World championships and set a tournament record for a Canadian, edging out the legendary Marie-Phillip Poulin in this offensive category.

The first period saw both teams show off their offensive speed and both goaltenders stood strong early.

Kaitlyn Teixeira opened the scoring midway through the frame to give the Panthers a 1-0 lead. This energized the Panthers and Abby Lunney doubled the Panthers' lead to 2-0 with a bullet shot on a cross-seam feed from Jersie Lindley. The Panthers continued their push in the second and were rewarded with another Teixeira marker?the completion of a beautiful 3-way passing play by Degeer and Johnston.

With Central York ahead 3-0, Kraemer took full advantage of a lull in the Panthers' defensive coverage and fired a rocket past Vaccari to get the Rangers on the board. This energized the Rangers, but Vaccari repelled the Kitchener-Waterloo onslaught on several occasions to maintain the Panthers' 3-1 lead. Late in the frame, the Panthers put the game away. Ava Flint-- capitalizing on a face-off play that gave her an open lane to shoot--made no mistake to provide the winning margin of victory: Central York 4- KW Rangers 1.

In the Semi-Final game versus the #7-ranked Whitby Wolves, the Panthers were facing a team that was coming off a big upset 4-0 win over #2 ranked Burlington in the quarter-final. The Panthers and Wolves were two evenly-matched teams during the regular season with identical records of 1-1-1 against each other. It was evident that both teams came to play and both generated good scoring opportunities early in the period.

When Whitby managed to score late in the period to take the 1-0 lead, it was the first time the Panthers have trailed in the tournament. Down 2-0 to the Wolves after two periods, the Panthers brought their A-game in the 3rd. Finally, after many good chances, Avery Johnston got the Panthers on the board with 12 minutes left in the final frame. The Panthers had to press and took aggressive risks to tie the game. Unfortunately, an odd-man rush was generated by Whitby in the waning minutes and the Wolves' leading scorer Rylan Haslam made no mistake. She scored her second goal of the game and sealed the 3-1 victory for Whitby. In the other semi-final, the 4th-ranked London Devilettes upset the #1 ranked Durham West Lightning 3-2.

In the Bronze medal game versus the deposed Durham West Lightning, Panthers' Assistant Coach Mark Dubeau felt that ?this game had a gold medal feel. Both teams came out flying. A very fast game with both teams displaying the skills that got them to this point.?

The teams battled to a scoreless tie after two periods. The Panthers controlled the play for the first part of the third but, as Coach Debeau mentioned, ?we just couldn't find the back of the net. Durham scored on a goal mouth scramble mid-way through the frame and added another on a late power play to secure the Bronze with a 2-0 win.?

In the U22 Elite Gold Medal Game, the London Devilettes rallied from a 2-0 deficit to defeat Whitby 3-2.

By Jim StewartWith files from Mark Debeau