

Degeer's four-point performance leads Junior Panthers to 4-1 win over North York Storm

The Central York Junior Panthers' hot off their sparkling 2-1 OT win over Team China last Sunday' opened a weekend homestand at SARC with a decisive 4-1 victory over the North York Storm.

Captain Cheyenne Degeer's hat trick and assist pulled her to within five points of the OWHL scoring race lead and helped subdue the visitors from North York.

The white-clad Storm, sporting LA Kings replica jerseys with silver and black trim, struck early at 17:37 when Maria Mikaelyan's unassisted marker beat Panthers' netminder Izzy Whynot.

Exactly two minutes later, Degeer converted Mackenzie Cotey's pass to pull the Panthers into a 1-1 tie. The Panthers' leading scorer credited Cotey for creating the scoring opportunity that resulted in her 23rd of the season.

'Off the rebound, Mackenzie did a great job getting the puck and drew three players to her. She fed it to me and I was able to one-time it.'

Degeer's 24th of the season at 11:03 of the opening frame lifted the home side into the lead. The swift-skating forward described the go-ahead goal: 'It happened so fast. The puck was chipped in to their end. I toe-dragged it around the defensemen, deked the goalie, and was able to backhand it into the net.'

Degeer and Assistant Captain Klaire Essex both took exception to Whynot being run at 14:00 of the second period by an aggressive North York skater. Both on-ice leaders addressed their concerns to game officials on consecutive shifts. Samantha Whittle replaced Whynot at 12:05. Seconds after the goaltender substitution, Clara Williams banged home the Panthers' third goal during a goalmouth scramble with persistent Avery Johnson and hard-digging Degeer earning assists for keeping the puck alive.

Whynot returned to the cage at 10:55 after a breather. She protected the Panthers' precarious 3-1 lead with a big kick save at 4:00 and flashed the leather at 2:15 to stifle any North York momentum.

The Panthers' full attack mode in the third period exhausted North York goaltender Lainey VanVlack as she faced a shooting gallery in the final twenty minutes of play.

After the Panthers narrowly missed three prime scoring opportunities minutes into the third period, Degeer completed her hat trick with a patient move past the left post that pulled VanVleck out of position.

Demonstrating poise under pressure, the Panthers' Captain tucked the puck inside the left post around a Storm defender to give her team a comfortable 4-1 lead at 13:58. Williams and Johnston earned assists on Degeer's 25th of the season.

In total, the Panthers fired 15 quality shots on net and many more that just missed the target during the final period.

The full-scale attack was part of Central York Head Coach Steve Dempsey's strategy against the Storm.

'We played with speed, especially in the third period. We did a good job to put them under pressure. I reminded them after the second period that we're ranked #9 in the country and they better start acting like it. We were anticipating pucks much better and we got to loose pucks to control the play. We also tried getting their goalie going east-west since she squares up shots so well. We went behind the net a fair amount, too, to keep [VanVleck] moving side to side.'

Another factor that contributed to the Panthers' success on Saturday afternoon was momentum carried over from their narrow 2-1

win over Team China.

Zoe Li, who tallied both goals in her club's sublime victory at the ACC, made the connection between the games: "We were playing a much bigger, more experienced team and it was a challenge for our young team that we were able to take back to our league. We played a strong third period, but we should have been playing like that earlier in the game."

Li reflected on her important overtime goal in front of full house at the ACC last Sunday: "Honestly, it was exciting to get a big goal like that. It was exciting to play in front of a big crowd and the whole arena erupted when we scored in overtime. We felt the eruption on the ice."

The veteran Panthers' defender complimented Degeer's three-goal performance to sink North York on Saturday: "She has a nose for the net. She's in the right spot so often. We need her scoring because we're in our playoff push right now. We're working on getting better in every remaining game before the playoffs. We're playing like we're starting the playoffs right now and we need to get off to better starts as a team."

Both Degeer and Li's scoring heroes in Central York's last two games expressed the kind of urgency and self-reflexivity befitting the 9th-ranked team in Canada and it was evident that these veteran Panthers would not be resting on their laurels.

The Central York Girls Hockey Association will co-host the annual Silver Stick international tournament on February 7-9 in Aurora and Newmarket. The colorful opening ceremonies at the ACC will be at 4:30 on Friday, February 7.

The Junior Panthers will host the Toronto Leaside Wildcats at 4:25 on Sunday, February 9 at SARC. The OWHL regular season game will serve as the climactic event of the Silver Stick tourney.

By Jim Stewart