

FIVE MINUTE MAJOR: Tigers stumble into fiftieth season, but with pride and history intact

By Jake Courtepatte

Since taking over the reins of the OJHL's Aurora Tigers in August of 2015, ex-NHLer Jim Thomson has had a tough task. Like all clubs past the minor hockey ranks, a properly-run Junior A team rides a cycle: years are spent building a contender, scouring the AAA systems for the talent that can take your team to the next level. If you're lucky, the work pays off in the form of a championship, or in the case of the OJHL, a coveted Dudley Cup.

The 2014-15 Tigers finished the season with the top record in the OJHL, winning their third-straight North Division title. After reaching the league finals against the Toronto Lakeshore Patriots the previous season, the regular season champs were bounced in the second playoff round by the Kingston Voyageurs, signaling that the club had reached its peak, the top of the rollercoaster, and was now gaining speed on the big drop.

Enter Thomson.

The first-time owner inherited a team that was fresh off losing some of the best talent it had seen in years. Cameron Morrison, who won Rookie of the Year in the 2014-15 season and was drafted by the NHL's Colorado Avalanche last June, was on his way south to play in the United States Hockey League.

Michael Laidley, a Jonathon Toews-esque centreman and captain of the team, was headed to the NCAA's Division 1 to lace up for the St. Lawrence University Saints.

The third member of Aurora's top star-studded line, and perhaps the most gifted goal scorer, Johnny Curran, returned to his hometown of Niagara Falls to play in the Junior B Greater Ontario Hockey League.

Not to say the 2015-16 Tigers were forced into a complete rebuild: Drake Board, a small but wildly-quick forward who had a breakout offensive season in 2014-15, took on the burden of first line minutes left behind by his teammates moving on.

It was in June of 2016, after the Tigers were eliminated in the first round of the OJHL playoffs by the Wellington Dukes, that the rebuild was officially welcomed. Board was dealt to the Cobourg Cougars, who were gearing up for an RBC Cup run, the last piece of the old Tigers dynasty that never was.

The 2016-17 season was a lost cause from the start. As a writer, your creative ability is tested to its limit when looking to put the same information into different words each week. Yet this is the process that all hockey teams are put through, a ringer to test the ability of the executives to start over from the ground up.

Just look at the Maple Leafs. Thomson and his team, namely GM Dermot Anderson, are looking for their Mitch Marner, their William Nylander, their Auston Matthews: though they don't have the luck of the draw in terms of an Entry Draft, and will rely purely on the ability of their scouts.

Perhaps they thought they found their Matthews in the form of rookie star Mel Melconian this past season, whose goal-scoring prowess was reminiscent of Morrison's two years prior. But like Morrison, the OJHL Rookie of the Year may have been too big of a fish in too small of a pond, with the Tigers as a stepping stone to further their career, as is often the case in minor Junior hockey. But with development camp just around the corner, the club should have little worry in filling out those camp spots. Despite their recent record, the Tigers franchise has long been considered a destination among Junior A hockey, and heading into its fiftieth season, has the track record to prove it.

The club is currently on the hunt to recruit alumni for this year's home opener, and just a quick glance at a list of former Tigers is enough to make one want to don the black and gold.

Jim Rutherford. Mike Kostka. Mike Kitchen. David Clarkson. Dominic Moore. All have made their mark on the NHL, some with the rings to prove it, and are a part of the Tigers' fifty years of history.

Soon the likes of Morrison, Melconian, or former captain Dylan Sikura, who signed an entry-level deal with the Chicago Blackhawks, could be added to that list.

Nobody likes to see a rebuild, including this sports writer. Yet it is an inevitable part of a hockey franchise's cyclical life. The Tigers should enter their golden anniversary with that in mind, and a long and storied history to back it up.