

Hodgins makes 86 saves in Junior Tigers? two-game home-and-home sweep of Buzzers

The Aurora Tigers continued their late-season burst of success by shutting out playoff-bound St. Michael's 3-0 on Sunday afternoon in Toronto and edging the Buzzers 4-3 on Saturday night in front of 300 fans at the ACC.

Tigers' netminder Kian Hodgins earned First Star of the Game honors on Sunday by stopping all 41 shots fired on net by the Buzzers. Hodgins was sensational on Saturday as well?repelling 45 of 48 shots he faced in Aurora.

The Tigers' Grand Finale featured a poignant fifteen-minute pre-game ceremony.

The centre ice presentations?presided over by Mayor Tom Mrakas, Tigers Head Coach and General Manager James Thomson, and long-time Tigers Assistant Coach Dave Goverde?honored the billet families who cared for five out-of-town Tigers players this season; recognized the recent passing of legendary Tigers Public Address Announcer Gene Gallant whose booming voice provided gravitas for the club's two national championships in 2004 and 2007; and applauded the career of Tigers Assistant Captain Avery Grant who was joined on-ice by his extended family.

Grant?described as ?a fearless defender? during the pre-game ceremony?was moved by the recognition.

?It was definitely an amazing feeling. I didn't know how many of my family were going to attend. When they just kept coming along the red carpet to centre ice, it showed how much support I've received from them.?

The veteran defender described what it's meant to him to be a Tiger.

?It's been everything. My grandparents lived in Aurora when I was growing up. We'd come and visit them and go to Tigers games as kids. Playing here has been special for me, especially with the recent passing of my grandmother.?

In a game filled with sentiment for Grant, the team leader on and off the ice described the key to the one-goal victory over the Buzzers: ?Sticking to our new structures that [Head Coach] James [Thomson] has put in place. Our clear breakouts tonight were the result of lots of practice time spent on clearing our own zone. We've adapted well and played our best hockey over the last three weeks.?

One of the keys to the Tigers' improved fortunes in February?during which they have won five of eight games on Head Coach Thomson's watch?has been excellent goaltending and Grant praised the 45-save performance of Hodgins versus the Buzzers on Saturday night.

?Kian's been great. We're the oldest guys on the team. He's very vocal back there and he's always talking to us. He helps the defensemen.?

Both Hodgins and Grant were called upon many times during the chippy contest to serve as effective penalty killers. The exhausted Tiger defenseman expressed his satisfaction at being called upon to defend power plays and repel the Buzzers at the end of the game when the visitors were pushing hard for the equalizer.

?I definitely feel honored to be trusted so much to be on the ice during the critical parts of the game. Since I'm not a big offensive player, killing penalties is something I take pride in. I'm glad the coaching staff has faith in me to do the right thing. I was happy we could stop them at the end and to win my final game as a Tiger.?

The only power play goal that Grant's PK squad gave up was nine minutes into the first period with Tigers defender Martin Maryanovski in the sin bin for holding. Buzzers forward Julian Campoli buried a rebound off Caiden Clair's blast from the left point,

tucking the puck between the pads of Hodgins to stake the navy blue-clad visitors to a 1-0 lead.

Hodgins turned aside 18 of the 19 shots he faced in the first period and his excellence between the pipes created time for the Tigers' offence to recalibrate.

With 4:22 remaining in the opening frame, Charlie Hotles took a pass from Sebastian Catalano, spun, and sniped a snapshot past Buzzers' netminder Jonathan Frattaroli high glove side to pull the home side even.

Thirty seconds later, speedy centre Gianfranco Rosella fired a laser wrist shot from the right faceoff circle which was redirected by Catalano and presto the Tigers had their first lead of the game.

The Tigers added to their lead early in the second period. 1:30 into the middle frame, Johnathan Cirone fired a shot from between circles that knuckled and fooled Frattaroli putting the home side up 3-1.

Thirteen minutes later, the free-flowing Tigers' power play struck when Anrijs Bundzenieks corralled Cirone's pass, used his big frame to create space between the circles, and snapped a shot past Frattaroli to give Aurora a three-goal lead.

Unfortunately, a defensive lapse late in the second period by the Tigers allowed Julian Mandarino to cut in off the left wing and the speedy forward roofed one popping Hodgins's water bottle skyward with 4.2 seconds on the clock to pull the visitors to within two goals.

The visitors were coming off a come-from-behind OT win in Caledon on Thursday night rallying from a 5-2 deficit to win 6-5 versus the Admirals and the seventh-place Buzzers seemed ready to replicate the feat.

However, the young Tigers forestalled the Buzzers' second consecutive comeback for the most of the third period clinging to their hard-fought two-goal lead.

The persistent visitors pulled Frattaroli with 2:33 left in the game for an extra attacker. With 1:54 on the clock, the Buzzers took advantage of their 6-on-5 when Caiden Clair banged home a rebound on the edge of the crease past a sprawled Hodgins.

The Aurora goaltender fended off the game-tying goal on a doubly-deflected puck at 1:05 and managed to get in front of a ricocheting shot with 36 ticks on the clock to preserve the Tigers' victory. Hodgins was mobbed at the end of the game by his teammates.

On Sunday in Toronto, Mazanik, Cayden Smith, and Cirone paced Aurora's attack with one goal each in the club's shutout victory.

After a scoreless first period, Mazanik's power play goal gave the Tigers a 1-0 lead.

2:45 into the final frame, two Tigers reached milestones to make it 2-0. Smith tallied his 20th of the season and earned Bundzenieks his 30th assist of the season.

Cirone closed the scoring five minutes later when he finished a passing play started by Jamie Buscarini and Jonathan Scott.

Sandwiched between the weekend wins versus the Buzzers was an 8-1 loss to the high-flying, first-place Golden Hawks in Trenton on Friday night. Hotles's power play goal assisted by Rosella and Mazanik was scored in the second period to pull the visitors to within two goals at 3-1. However, Trenton fired five unanswered goals to improve their OJHL East-leading record to 45-9-0-2.

By Jim Stewart