

Izzy Whynot's 28-save shutout leads U22 Panthers to thrilling 1-0 win over Mississauga Hurricanes



Izzy Whynot turned aside all 28 shots she faced and Amber Esterbrooks tallied the game-winning goal to lead the U22 Central York Panthers to a hard-fought 1-0 win over the Mississauga Hurricanes on Sunday afternoon at the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex.

Over 200 fans filled the arena to watch the Junior Panthers-Hurricanes tilt which was billed as the climactic event of the 25th Annual Silver Stick tournament.

The game did not disappoint.

The OWHL U22 Elite contest featured great skating, dozens of scoring opportunities, and a classic goaltenders' duel between Whynot and Hurricanes' netminder Catherine Hodgins who stymied the Panthers most of the afternoon with a tidy 33-save performance of her own.

Izzy Whynot looked exhausted after her busy Sunday afternoon, but heaped praise on her teammates for their contributions to her shutout.

?The defense did a great job blocking shots that I might not have saved. They had great stick work, too. I was seeing the puck well and I was able to fight through screens. We worked so hard in practice this week and the things we worked on showed up in the game today.?

When asked to define the key to victory, the Junior Panthers' goalie remarked: ?We definitely had a bunch of good second efforts today and we played for each other. I was really happy with the win.?

Head Coach Steve Dempsey echoed his goaltender's assessment of the team's performance.

?Our second efforts tonight were really good. Our commitment to do what was needed in the moment was evident from a team performance point of view. I told the team before the game that we don't need you to be perfect, but we needed a perfect effort. We got that tonight from Izzy and her teammates.?

Coach Dempsey was pleased to see a full rink to see his Junior Panthers play on a Sunday afternoon.

?We're trying to create an entertaining environment for our fans. It was exciting for us to be featured as a highlight of the tournament and I think today's game provided encouragement for young people to play sports and to know that there are really good hockey opportunities in town.?

The winning sports culture that Coach Dempsey and the Central York Panthers Girls Hockey Association have built was evident in all corners of the arena: the ceremonial puck drop featured the oldest and youngest Panthers and Hurricanes spanning the respective blue lines; the Panthers' and Silver Stick tournament gear was being hawked at tables in the lobby by a group of dedicated volunteers; and the filled stands at SARC were treated to an excellent OWHL game won by the home side.

Sunday afternoon's contest featured two evenly-matched teams that skated to a scoreless tie after 20 minutes of play. The Hurricanes, named in tribute to legendary Mayor Hazel McCallion, skated in classic Bruins white jerseys with gold and black trim. The Panthers, in tribute to their organization's navy home jerseys with red trim, donned matching flecks of facial war paint to add more color to their countenance.

The fast-skating, hard-checking squads remained in a scoreless deadlock until Panthers' forward Amber Esterbrooks used a burst of speed to shed two Hurricane defenders and beat Hodgins short side at 12:52 of the middle frame.

Hailey Maguire and Hannah Clarke earned assists on Esterbrooks's team-leading 18th goal that gave the Panthers a 1-0 lead that they would not relinquish.

One of the principal reasons that the Panthers did not relinquish the lead was the second period brilliance of Whynot during which she made 16 saves.

One defensive stand that could be considered the turning point of the game was a Panthers' PK with gritty leading scorer Cheyenne Degeer serving a body checking infraction. The Panthers' netminder made a big breakaway save at 8:01, and then flashed the leather three times in twenty-five seconds to prove the adage that a team's goalie is its best penalty killer.

Whynot's most spectacular save took place with 11 seconds left in the period when she slid side-to-side across her crease to cover the lower corner and kick out the tying goal to preserve her team's precarious one-goal lead and victory.

The Panthers were coming off a 4-4 OT tie versus the Bluevale Hawks at the Gemini Sportsplex on Saturday night.

Degeer, Hannah Franz, Zoe Li, and Captain Clarke scored for Central York. Clarke's goal with two minutes remaining in the game tied the contest and helped secure the valuable point on the road.

With the tie and a win on the weekend, the Panthers improved their record to 20-9-1-2 and jumped back into a fourth place tie with the Burlington Barracudas in the 20-team Elite U22 league.

The Panthers host the Barracudas on Saturday, February 10.

Puck drop is set for 1.55 p.m. at SARC. On Sunday, February 11, the Panthers host the Barrie Sharks at SARC. Opening faceoff is at 1.25 p.m.

By Jim Stewart