

Junior Panthers? 3-2 OT win over Durham West Lightning extends winning streak to eight

Kiera Johnson's dramatic overtime goal with 1.8 seconds left on the clock lifted the red-hot Central York Junior Panthers to a 3-2 victory over Durham West Lightning at SARC on Sunday afternoon.

Johnson described her timely tally and its set-up by long-time teammate Alessia Stoikos: ?It was nerve-wracking. We were forechecking and Alessia knew there were only six seconds left when she went to the endboards to get the puck. She delivered a beautiful pass to me and I one-timed it. The celebration was really electric.?

The veteran Panther forward explained the importance of Central York's win over the fourth-ranked team in Canada.

?As [Head Coach] Steve [Dempsey] said in the dressing room after the game, we were the first Junior Panther team in franchise history to sweep West Durham in the regular season. It's great, we're proud of ourselves after putting in so much work all season long, and it's a nice legacy to leave the next generation of Panthers.?

Johnson described the keys to handing the Lightning only their sixth loss in regulation this season: ?We talked about our energy on and off the ice. We had to check better, especially in the high slot or in ?the house' as we call it.?

When Johnson was asked if her overtime game-winning goal was the most important in her Central York career, she concurred: ?100%.?

?Yes?without a doubt ? it's my biggest Panther goal. It feels unreal. I was so happy for the team. I was really happy for Alessia. We've played together off and on since we were 12. We know each other really well on the ice and she knew where I was going to be with two seconds left. That's why she was able to find me with such a great pass.?

The red-clad Panthers closed the game as they opened the game?with their trademark tenacious forechecking.

After Central York was foiled in the goalmouth by Lightning goaltender Madison Campbell during successive rushes, Annabella Van Berkel opened the scoring when she capitalized on a breakout gaffe by the West Durham defense corps.

Van Berkel's lightning-fast release from between the circles beat Campbell low glove side to stake Central York to a 1-0 lead at 14:05.

Durham West took advantage of a Panther parade to the sin bin to start the second period.

When Central York defender Clara Liu clobbered a Lightning forward into the goalpost at 17:38, it proved costly. Fifteen seconds into the Durham West power play, Taylor Leemrijse's shot from the slot ricocheted off two players. Panthers' netminder Samantha Whittle blocked most of Leemrijse's laser, but the third ricochet hit the back of her left leg and tumbled past the goal line.

Whittle's work was otherwise spectacular over the first two periods as she turned aside 20 of the 21 shots she faced.

It was clear by the third period that part of West Durham's game plan was to target high-scoring Cheyenne Degeer with as many body checks as they could get away with. The tactic backfired at 14:35 when Lightning defender Ella Klinkhammer drew a four-minute minor for head contact against Degeer.

In an ensuing moment of poetic justice, Degeer lit up the Lightning as payback for their game-long antics.

The gritty Panthers' captain took a pass from Mackenzie Cote and?with saint-like patience?skated with the puck from behind the

net, created slot space, and snapped a puck high stick side that beat Campbell cleanly.

Degeer's go-ahead goal at 13:16 was her 31st of the season?most in the U22 Division of the OWHL.

The Lightning tied the game 2-2 with exactly eleven minutes to go in the third period when Soren Biderman's low, bouncing shot from the right circle was misplayed by Whittle.

It was a moment of offensive zone puck luck for the Lightning and Biderman's marker lifted her teammates' spirits.

Whittle made a sensational game-saving stop with 11.2 seconds left in regulation?repelling a clear-cut breakaway by the hard-charging Lightning ? to set up Johnson's overtime heroics.

On Friday night, the Panthers defeated the Toronto Aeros 4-1 at Vaughan Sports Village to extend their heater to seven games. Central York dominated the Aeros in the opening period, outshooting their hosts 18-3.

Panthers' veteran defender Zoe Li?whose dramatic goal sunk Team China in overtime on January 26 at the ACC-- opened the scoring at 2:06 of the opening frame with fellow defender Clara Liu earning an assist.

Degeer continued her torrid scoring streak on Friday night in Vaughan. She fired a pair of goals twenty-nine seconds apart midway through the middle period to give the visitors a 3-0 lead. Clara Williams assisted on Degeer's 29th and 30th goals of the season that moved the Panthers' captain into second place in the OWHL scoring race.

Erica Buckley's 16th goal of the season with 7:02 left in the middle frame?assisted by Elizabeth Janovski and Liu?gave the Panthers a four-goal cushion heading into the third period.

At 14:43 of the final frame, Aeros forward Breanne Hurley broke Izzy Whynot's bid for her fourth shutout, but the veteran Panthers' goaltender lowered her GAA to 1.55 and raised her SAV% to .936 with the road win. Central York outshot the Aeros 42-14.

The Junior Panthers embark on a five-game road trip that will take them to Windsor, Bluewater, Burlington, Waterloo, and Cambridge before returning home to host the Oakville Hornets for their last regular season home game on Sunday, March 9.

Puck drop will be 1:25 at SARC.

By Jim Stewart