

Junior Panthers drop Games 1 and 2 of OWHL playoff series versus the Ice Wolves in Kingston

The Central York Junior Panthers will need to run the table in Aurora next weekend to keep their 2024-25 OWHL playoff hopes alive.

The U22 Panthers' post-season aspirations are on thin ice after dropping Games 1 and 2 of their opening round best-of-five series with the Ice Wolves in Kingston on Saturday and Sunday.

On Sunday afternoon, the seventh-seeded Panthers attempted to bounce back from a 4-1 loss on Saturday.

Central York outshot the ninth-seeded Ice Wolves by 30-15 in Game 2 and played a dominant third period, but the opportunistic home side eked out a narrow 2-1 victory.

Although Central York (30-12-0-2) finished twenty points ahead of Kingston (23-19-0-2) at the end of the 44-game regular season, it was mostly Ice Wolves at the Invista Centre in the first two games of the series.

Panthers' Head Coach Steve Dempsey gave the home team credit for their performance on the weekend: "Kingston did a great job capitalizing on its opportunities. We didn't play very well on Saturday. There were two goals we'd like to have back. I think the long winning streak might have taken away from our focus going into the playoffs and overall we didn't play the desperate kind of hockey we need to play in the postseason.

"We did a much better job on Sunday, we outshot them 17-8 in the third period, and made a 180-degree improvement on Saturday. We were just missing goals on Sunday—we had pucks just rolling off our sticks that we usually shoot into the back of the net. Their goalie also played very well, especially on Sunday."

Coach Dempsey's Panthers outshot the Ice Wolves 30-15 in Game 2, but Kingston goaltender Aneta Senkova was up to the task at hand—repelling 29 of the 30 shots she faced.

Senkova was the 18th-ranked goalie during the regular season with a 2.15 GAA, a .926 SAV%, and four shutouts in her 27 starts. However, in the opening two playoff games versus the higher-ranked Panthers, Senkova's numbers have been considerably better with a 1.00 GAA and a .960 SAV%. Coach Dempsey has seen Senkova a few times this season: "She's a streaky goalie and she's got her angles set really well right now. She finished the regular season with a number of excellent starts so she's a hot goalie."

Senkova's heroics between the pipes all but neutralized the Central York's top-scoring forwards—including 35-goal scorer Cheyenne Degeer who was kept off the scoresheet on the weekend. The Junior Panthers' offence managed only one late-third period goal in both contests, and the Aurora-based squad trailed in both games from start to finish.

In Game One on Saturday, Kingston jumped out to a 2-0 lead midway through the first period.

Ava Vrana opened the scoring at 12:14 and Samantha Keil gave the home side a two-goal cushion at 8:51.

With two seconds left in the middle frame, Claire Chambers's power play goal increased Kingston's lead to 3-0. Five minutes into the third period, Cora Galliah provided the knockout punch for the Ice Wolves to give Kingston a commanding four-goal lead.

Elizabeth Janovski got the Panthers on the scoreboard with 3:39 left when she converted a pass from Amy Clements to beat Senkova, but Central York's offence was limited to 20 shots.

The upset loss not only inspired the Ice Wolves, but it also ended the Junior Panthers' impressive 14-game winning streak.

In Game Two on Sunday, Kingston's Peyton Cormier's power play goal with 5:20 left in the first period opened the scoring. The upstart Ice Wolves fired the game-winning goal with 4:51 left in the second period when Ashlea Whyte beat Izzy Whynot.

Much like Saturday's performance, the Panthers didn't score until late in the third period. Avery Johnston, Central York's second-leading point scorer in the regular season, lit the lamp behind Senkova with 3:09 left on the clock. Zoe Li and Clara Liu earned assists on Johnston's first of the playoffs.

Central York is scheduled to host Games 3, 4, and 5 at SARC on Friday, March 21 at 7 p.m., Saturday, March 22 at 1.55 p.m., and Sunday, March 23 at 1.25 p.m. All must-wins for the Junior Panthers if they hope to advance to the next round of the OWHL playoffs.

Coach Dempsey pointed out what's needed to enable a three-game sweep by the Panthers at SARC: "We'll need to disrupt Senkova's confidence. We also knew this series was going to be a long series. They won their games on home ice and now it's our turn to win our games at home. We need to keep the same mentality we showed in the third period on Sunday when we outshot them and played our game. We'll be focused on winning the first period on Friday and go from there."

By Jim Stewart