

Junior Panthers extend heater to twelve games with narrow victories in Waterloo and Burlington

The Central York Junior Panthers extended their winning streak to 12 games with a pair of timely road wins in Waterloo and Burlington.

The Panthers defeated the Waterloo Ravens 3-2 at the RIM Manulife Financial Sportsplex on Sunday afternoon. Central York Girls Hockey Association President and Panthers 22U Assistant Coach Mark Dubeau provided context for the victory versus the Ravens, including much praise for starting goaltender Samantha Whittle: "Waterloo had their Senior Day. We didn't have the same energy on the big ice at RIM Park after beating Burlington on Saturday. It was a tough road win against the Ravens with Sammy making key saves to keep us in it. Overall, we were a little sloppy, but showed we can pull it together when we don't have our best stuff."

Whittle stopped 29 of 31 shots she faced to earn the W and Captain Cheyenne Degeer scored the unassisted, shorthanded game-winner with 5:12 left in the contest. It was Degeer's league-leading 35th goal of the season.

Coach Dubeau described the implications of Degeer's prolific scoring this season for the Central York Girls Hockey Association: "Degeer is still in the hunt for the points and goal lead for the league. It would be monumental of her and the Panthers if she could lead the league in points or goals at the end of the season."

After a scoreless first period, Degeer opened the scoring at 11:52 of the first period when she converted Clara Williams's feed past Ravens' netminder Grace Kipfer. Another equally red-hot Panther?Annabella Van Berkel?gave Central York a 2-0 lead at 5:36 of the third period. Keira Johnson and Zoe Li earned assists on Van Berkel's 18th of the season.

Sara Forewell's power play goal narrowed the Panthers' lead in the final frame, but the significance of Degeer's timely shortie was even more evident when the Ravens' Kennedy Sundvall pulled the home side to within one with 58 seconds left. The Panthers held off Waterloo's final Senior Day charge to earn their twelfth win in a row.

On Saturday night at the Mainway Recreation Centre in Burlington, the eighth-place Panthers defeated the seventh-place Burlington Barracudas 4-2 in a penalty-filled contest. With the crucial road victory, the Panthers moved past the Barracudas by one point in the standings. Coach Dubeau acknowledged the significance of the victory in the final portion of the regular season: "It was a big win for us in Burlington with big implications regarding the standings."

The Barracudas took advantage of Central York penalties and built a 2-0 lead five minutes into the second period on goals by Keeling Song and Katelynn Charlton. Coach Dubeau expressed his disappointment with the Junior Panthers' start: "Penalty trouble early spotted them a two-goal lead. However, we had a flurry in the second to go ahead and never looked back."

Veteran Panthers' forward Amber Esterbrooks initiated the midgame three-goal flurry when her unassisted goal at 12:24 pulled Central York within one.

Twenty-three seconds later, the Panthers' second-leading scorer Avery Johnston notched her 10th of the season and tied the game with helpers from Degeer and Williams.

The Junior Panthers took the lead less than two minutes later when Abby Pak scored at 10:18 with assists earned by Degeer and Alessia Stoikos.

Midway through the third period, Degeer picked up her third assist of the game when she set up Van Berkel's 17th of the season.

Van Berkel's insurance marker sealed the victory for the Panthers who endured a belligerent Barracudas squad. The home side drew six consecutive penalties in the final frame to neutralize their own comeback attempt.

Panthers' goaltender Izzy Whynot put forth a sublime 39-save performance, including 16 stops in the final period to keep Burlington off the scoreboard. Whynot's efforts between the pipes ensured her team's key road victory over a prospective playoff opponent and moved the Panthers' winning streak to eleven. Coach Dubeau praised his netminder's work versus the Barracudas: "Izzy closed the door to secure the W for us." Whynot's 1.51 GAA ranks 8th and her .938 SAV% ranks 5th in the 25-team OWHL 22U Division.

Whynot's surging Panthers host the Oakville Hornets at 1:25 PM on Sunday, March 9 at SARC. It will be the U22 Elite team's final regular season home game and CYP President Dubeau noted the importance of the final regular season tilt versus the Hornets: "Our on-ice Senior Day recognition ceremony will have us graduating 14 of our 20 Junior players."

By Brock Weir