

Junior Panthers' heater reaches eleven with 5-4 win over #3-ranked Sabres

The Central York Junior Panthers are skating into 2025 on an impressive eleven-game heater.

On a recent Saturday in Toronto, the Panthers shut out the Leaside Wildcats 4-0 to make it ten wins in a row. The team's hot streak was perpetuated the next afternoon by an emphatic 5-4 win over the Stoney Creek Sabres at SARC.

The statement win over the #3-ranked team in Canada was the Panthers' sixth in a row in OWSA play.

The six consecutive regular season wins, coupled with their recent five-game sweep in an international tournament in Kitchener-Waterloo, vaulted Central York to #9 in Canada.

Panthers' Head Coach Steve Dempsey offered insights into his Top Ten team's torrid pace in December: "It's nice for them to have this experience. We've changed our style of play this season and they've bought into it. We get the puck going north really quick and rely on our forechecking which is the strongest part of our game. Earlier in the season, they didn't know what the team identity was with the departure of six players including last year's captain Hannah Clarke. The identity of the team has changed, we've made some line adjustments, and they've figured out the style of play that is making us successful."

Coach Dempsey complimented his captain Cheyenne Degeer with making the adjustments that come with wearing the C and the responsibilities that come with it.

"Cheyenne has found her niche as a leader and a scorer. She's settled into her own game. She plays an aggressive forechecking game that highlights her ability to create turnovers and opportunities."

Degeer, with a two-point performance versus Stoney Creek, moved into second in the OWSA scoring race with 19 goals and 17 assists in 22 games.

The matchup of two Top Ten teams in the OWSA featured a high-scoring first period as two explosive offences produced six goals in 17 minutes.

Panthers forward Amber Esterbrooks opened the scoring with helpers from Klaire Essex and Clara Liu at 17:33.

The Sabres replied with goals by Clara Stanley and Holly VanNetten to take a one-goal lead, but Central York tied the game 2-2 when Essex set up Abby Pak with 3:39 left in the opening frame.

Cheyenne Degeer's fifth power play marker of the season restored the Panthers' one-goal margin at 2:02, but Stoney Creek's Mikalyla Barnes slipped a puck past Central York netminder Izzy Whynot with only four seconds left on the clock to deadlock the high-scoring affair at 3-3.

Coach Dempsey observed that the effects of the winning streak helped his team bounce back from the Sabres' potentially-deflating goal: "By being on a long winning streak, they've found a way to win games. They've developed a level of confidence. Even when we fell behind against Stoney Creek or when we gave up that late first period goal, we were able to battle back. We're stronger mentally. When they give up a goal, they know in 15 seconds they can get that goal back. We just went back on the attack on the next shift. They're playing with a lot more poise and that has so much to do with us also drastically reducing our turnovers."

The poised Panthers pulled ahead 2:24 into the middle frame when Captain Degeer set up Elizabeth Jenovski to stake Aurora's best junior hockey team to a 4-3 lead.

With four minutes remaining in the second period, Annabella Van Berkel fired the decisive goal to give the Panthers a 5-3 margin

heading into intermission. It was Van Berkel's second goal of the weekend and both were game winners. Keira Johnson and Terry Wang earned assists on Van Berkel's eighth of the season.

Van Netten netted her second of the game for the Sabres to narrow the Panthers' lead to 5-4 with four minutes remaining, but the confident squad shut down Stoney Creek during clutch time to pull into seventh place in the 25-team OWHA.

The big win over the Sabres on Sunday was preceded by a tidy 4-0 shutout of the Leaside Wildcats in Toronto on Saturday. Izzy Whynot earned the W with a 27-save performance. It was the Panther goaltender's second shutout of the season.

Coach Dempsey noted the connection between the win over the Wildcats and the win the next day versus the Sabres: "It was a big six-point win for us ? they've been chasing us in the standings, and it was in their barn. There was a bit of a rivalry in the game with some former Panthers in the Wildcats lineup. We played well against a very aggressive team and that prepped us for the Sabres' aggressive style of play. It was a very good game to get us ready for Stoney Creek.?"

Van Berkel's power play goal got the Panthers on the board with 12:14 left in the first period. Eight minutes later, Mackenzie Cotey deepened the Wildcats' deficit to two heading into first intermission.

Clara Williams gave the Panthers a three-goal cushion less than three minutes into the middle frame and Essex's power play marker with 5:25 left in the third period provided Central York with their margin of victory in Toronto.

The Junior Panthers will face off against the Barrie Sharks on Friday, January 10. The Panthers' next home game is Saturday, January 18 when they host the Nepean Wildcats. Puck drop at SARC will be 1:55.

By Jim Stewart