

Junior Panthers? heater reaches six with 4-1 win over Toronto Leaside Wildcats in Silver Stick?s closing event

In the closing event of the 26th annual Silver Stick Tournament, the Central York Panthers defeated the Toronto Leaside Wildcats 4-1 on Sunday afternoon at SARC.

The OWHL regular season game featured a colorful opening ceremony to close the 76-team international tourney. Toronto Leaside and Central York interspersed the organizations' U9 and U22 squads on their respective blue lines.

After the national anthem, all four teams converged at center ice for a group photo in a celebration of hockey sisterhood.

It was a sentimental moment at SARC and the white with red-trimmed Leaside jerseys served as a perfect complement to the navy-blue clad Panthers for the collective shot.

The opening ceremonies closed the tournament effectively and the Showcase Game between the Panthers and Wildcats did not disappoint.

The speed of the Panthers (22-10-0-2) was on full display in the opening 20 minutes, but the home side could not finish its scoring opportunities.

Central York goaltender Izzy Whynot's spectacular acrobatic side-to-side save at 11:50 was the best of her 11 stops that kept the Wildcats (15-17-0-3) off the scoreboard.

Whynot was the difference in the second period, too. She served as a Navy Blue Wall?making thirteen saves to frustrate the ?Cats?before Central York rediscovered its ability to score goals.

A pair of penalties to the Wildcats at 9:06 and 8:38 gifted the home side with a 5-on-3 power play and Panthers' Coach Steve Dempsey called a timeout to draw up a play to break the scoreless tie.

Great puck control by Central York ensued with Coach Dempsey's squad using the o-zone space. Avery Johnston skated to an opening, fired a puck at Wildcats' netminder Isabella Lane, and Cheyenne Degeer banged in the rebound at 8:09?just as the coaching staff drew it up on the whiteboard.

With 56.4 seconds left in the middle frame, Amber Esterbrooks took a feed from Panther veteran Erica Buckley and banged in her own rebound to give the home side a 2-0 lead.

Clara Williams's hooking penalty with 38 seconds set up one of the oddest goals in Panthers' franchise history. During a defensive zone faceoff, the feisty Degeer pounced on the puck with nine seconds on the clock. Remarkably, the Wildcats' net was empty?Lane was pulled for an extra attacker, and the gutsy strategy by Leaside backfired miserably. Despite being impinged by the Wildcats' six skaters, the Panthers' captain found open ice and fired the puck into the yawning cage with exactly one second left on the clock. It was back breaker for the visitors.

The Panthers increased their lead to 4-0 when the tenacious Buckley dug the puck out of a goal crease pileup. A friendly bounce ended up on Annabella Van Berkel's stick who took a step to the side for a better angle and roofed a backhand over the fallen Lane in a fine demonstration of shooting skill. The rookie forward described the play that set up her marksmanship: ?We were crashing the net. I saw the puck come loose, Erica got it to me, I had no room to shoot so I created some space so I could go to my backhand high over their goalie.?

Van Berkel also played a prominent role on the game-ending PK while Elizabeth Janovski served a double minor that compelled the

Panthers to play short-handed for the remaining 3:08: ?We stuck together on the penalty kill. We were in a pack and protected our goalie. We were feeding off each other's energy. We were executing the coaching staff's system that they wanted us to use to finish the game.?

In addition to applauding her teammates' play on the PK, Van Berkel praised the play of Whynot who stopped 32 of 33 shots to earn the W, but lost her shutout with 8:53 to play.

?We should have done a better job of protecting the crease when Izzy got in the pileup to make a save, but she was all over the net in today's game. She had a hold of every rebound and played great for us.?

One of the youngest Panthers, Van Berkel gave credit to the veteran players for their leadership during the team's six-game heater: ?Our leaders are a big part of our winning streak. They show us how to play. We never get too high and we never get too low. They've been showing us how to react.?

Prior to their Silver Stick finale, many of the veteran Panthers to whom Van Berkel alluded led the way in a decisive 5-1 win against the Cambridge Rivulettes last Sunday at SARC. Buckley spurred the offence with two goals and Johnston, Williams, and Degeer added one each as Central York won its fifth in a row.

The Panthers opened the scoring at 13:47 when Johnston beat Rivulettes' netminder Courtney Beekson with helpers from Williams and Degeer. Two minutes later, ?The Tremendous Trio? struck again when Williams made it 2-0. Linemates Johnston and Degeer earned assists. At 8:47, Esterbrooks's pass was converted by Buckley to give the home side a three-goal lead.

Twenty seconds later, Cambridge's Quinn Carswell beat Central York goaltender Samantha Whittle to narrow the Rivulettes' deficit to 3-1.

After a scoreless middle frame, the Panthers pounced on Cambridge early in the third when Buckley fired her second goal of the game at 4:56 with help from Amy Clements and Elizabeth Janovski. An empty netter by Degeer closed the scoring with 3:24 to play.

The Junior Panthers host the Durham West Lightning on Saturday, February 15. Puck drop at SARC will be 1:55 p.m.

By Jim Stewart