

Junior Panthers? late-season slump continues with narrow losses to Whitby and Toronto Leaside

The sixth-place U22 Central York Panthers (26-15-0) have hit a rare rough patch in their otherwise fine OWHL season.

For the first time in 2025-26, the Junior Panthers are working through a four-game losing streak after being one of the dominant teams in the Elite 25-team loop for over five months.

Last Sunday afternoon at SARC, the Panthers' high-scoring offence was stymied by goalkeeper Sadie Davidson and Central York was edged 2-1 by the Whitby Wolves.

Panthers' Head Coach Steve Dempsey described his team's strategy versus the 14th-place Wolves: "Whitby's record isn't indicative of the quality of their players they have. We wanted to get more traffic to the net in this game and create more side-to-side scoring opportunities. We out-chanced them, but we're a work in progress right now as we prepare for the playoffs."

Coach Dempsey added, "We've been changing our offence to get our team ready for playoff hockey. We're trying to create more 2-on-1s and provide quick support. It was a close game, but that's sport for you - sometimes you play well enough to win and you don't. There are games in a winning streak that you don't deserve to win, but you do. In a losing streak, there are games you deserve to win, but don't, and I think they played well enough to win today. I thought some of our decision-making in the neutral zone cost us a bit."

Alexa Strano's shortie took advantage of the Panthers' decision-making in the neutral zone and gave the white-jerseyed, blue-stripped Wolves a 1-0 lead 2:22 into the first period.

The Panthers tied it two minutes later when Demi Lazarou notched her 14th of the season at 4:22 - earning assists for Briar Deckers and Ashley Minor.

5:11 into the second period, Katie Belk found space between the circles and her wicked wrist shot beat Panthers' netminder Jamie Sanford high blocker side. Remarkably, Belk's early goal in the middle frame stood up as the game-winning goal.

After Belk's breakaway attempt was repelled by Sanford to keep the home side's deficit at one, a penalty shot was awarded to Lazarou after a schmozzle in the Wolves' crease with 7:25 left in the second period. The talented Panthers' scorer was foiled on her deke and backhand attempt by Davidson, who made a number of high-quality saves in the middle twenty minutes to protect the visitors' narrow lead.

Despite a furious final push by the red-clad Panthers with Sanford pulled for the extra attacker at 2:12, Davidson stood tall in the Wolves' net and blocked pucks during two minutes of sustained pressure by the home side. The Panthers' second-leading scorer, Audrey Martone, came within millimetres of jamming home a rebound in the lower right-hand corner past Davidson with seconds left in the game, but the puck wedged between the post and Davidson's skate to keep Central York from getting the equalizer.

In the end, the Wolves-Panthers game was an entertaining goaltenders' duel with Davidson turning aside 22 of 23 shots to earn the win and Sanford saving 22 of 24. Both netminders were the stars of the contest.

In a Saturday night matchup, the 6th-place Panthers were upset 4-3 by the 13th-place Toronto Leaside Wildcats.

Coach Dempsey critiqued his team's performance in Toronto: "Saturday's game was a bit of a letdown. After competing with two of the top teams in the country last weekend, it was a disappointing result. We should have taken care of business but we got down early. We gave them a pair of Grade A chances, and they buried their opportunities."

Zoe Warner and Madeline Walters buried the Grade A chances to which Coach Dempsey referred and staked the Wildcats to a 2-0 lead just two minutes into the opening period.

Lily Paisley's 15th of the season ? assisted by Lazarou and Elizabeth Janovski ? pulled the Panthers to within one heading into first intermission.

However, the Wildcats restored their two-goal lead when Brooklyn Vito's power play goal lit the lamp five minutes in the second period.

The Panthers responded with a power play goal of their own when Abby Pak finished a passing play with Annabella Van Berkel and Zoe Ordanis to cut Central York's deficit to 3-2.

Jacqueline Kean's power-play marker at 4:17 into the third period put the home side up 4-2 and stood up as the game-winning goal.

Ordanis's 11th of the season ? assisted by Van Berkel ? made it 4-3 at 7:23, but that was as close as the slumping Panthers could get as they dropped their third game in a row.

Coach Dempsey discussed the importance of focusing his U22 Panthers squad on the upcoming Ottawa road trip and preparing for the league playoffs with only five games left in the regular season.

?Every game now is like a playoff game. It's scratch and claw time,? he said. ?We're playing two games in Ottawa against East Ottawa and the Senators that are must wins for us. We've talked about embracing our adversity. We have players playing through injuries, but every team is banged up this time of year. We really need to be ready to play with the next five-person unit prepared to play playoff hockey. We need to be warriors. We need to use the adversity we're facing right now as fuel.?

By Jim Stewart