

## Junior Panthers split Games 1 and 2 with Kingston to open OWHL playoffs

The U22 Central York Panthers had a golden opportunity to exorcise their recent OWHL playoff demons when the Kingston Ice Wolves settled in at SARC on Saturday and Sunday.

Last Spring, Kingston upset higher-ranked Central York in their best-of-five opening round series. During Saturday's matinee, the 7th-ranked Panthers edged the 10th-ranked Ice Wolves 2-1, lending credence to the adage "revenge is a dish best served cold."

It was Panther defender Mackenzie Cotey who meted out that revenge on behalf of her teammates when she tallied the game-winning goal late in the second period to break a 1-1 tie.

After Ice Wolves forward Ashlea Whyte was sent to the sin bin for body-checking at 3:44, Cotey took advantage of the open space in Kingston's zone.

Pinpoint passing by Zoe Ordanis and Annabella Van Berkel broke down the D, Cotey crept in from the blue line, cradled a pass from Van Berkel, and snapped the puck from between the circles past Ice Wolves' goalie Lilyana Reid.

The mobile defender described her game-winner that tickled the twine 23 seconds into the power play: "We were working the puck really well. It was a great power play by everybody on the ice. Zoe and Berkie got me the puck. I could see the open corner when I got it. Everyone was crashing the net so I know I needed to rip it."

After a scoreless first period, the Panthers got on the board 1:19 into the middle frame when Annabella Van Berkel rifled the puck past Reid. The significance of scoring first was described by Cotey: "It was so important. It gave us a big boost and got us hyped up. We scored on a set play. Abby [Pak] won the draw to me, I was able to pass it behind to Berkie, and create a screen for her. The play worked. It was a great shot by Berkie that went top right. She knows how to rip it."

"Big Goal" Van Berkel's quick opening marker was followed by a parade to the penalty box by both sides after an infraction-free first period. The Ice Wolves took advantage of their second power play and created sustained pressure in the Panthers' end. At 16:30, Whyte roofed the puck high blocker short side from the left faceoff circle, beating Central York netminder Claire Hicks to tie the game 1-1.

It was the only puck to elude the red-hot Hicks who backstopped the Panthers to their Game 1 victory. Cotey described her goaltender's 22-save performance: "She was amazing. She played incredible, especially in the second period when we had so many penalties. We feel very confident with her behind us. She was so locked in today, right from her pre-game rituals. Claire made some great sliding saves on the 2-on-1's to bail us out."

Hicks was, indeed, her team's best penalty killer in a game when the Panthers were penalized eight times in a 25-minute span in the second and third periods, including an odd four-minute minor to Cotey for head contact with 7:07 left in the game.

Cotey was puzzled by the call and noted that she "wasn't sure what I did to get that penalty."

She expressed relief that her PK fought off the double-minor and even generated a penalty shot after speedy Ellie Lewington was hauled down by Peyton Borton between the circles on a clear path to the net.

Lewington beat Reid, but missed by millimeters inside the right post.

In the final frenetic minutes of play, with the Kingston net empty, the Panthers preserved their one-goal lead with a combination of big blocks, active sticks, and Claire Hicks. Cotey credited that PK's selfless efforts for the big team win.

?One of the biggest things was blocking shots. Everyone was diving for pucks. We put our bodies on the line. Everyone was playing the team game when killing penalties?no one was on their own.?

On Sunday afternoon, the Panthers exploded out of the gate?looking dead-set on a weekend sweep?by outshooting the Ice Wolves 18-5 after 20 minutes of play. Incredibly, the hard-charging hosts were edged 2-1 as Lilyana Reid returned between the pipes for Kingston and repelled 44 of the 45 shots she faced to steal a win for the visitors.

Panthers Captain Keira Johnson broke Reid's Sunday afternoon hex when she rifled in a rebound off Lily Paisley's snap shot. Johnson?crashing the net on the left doorstep?lifted the puck over the sprawled Reid with 2:02 left in the game and the Panthers' net empty in favor of an extra attacker.

Despite being buoyed by Johnson's big goal, the home side's intense closing pressure did not yield another marker and the Ice Wolves escaped down the 401 with a narrow victory despite being outshot 45-15.

It was that kind of afternoon for the diligent Panthers. After a golden scoring opportunity by Demi Lazarou whose labelled wrist shot ticked off the top of Reid's stick and over the crossbar, the Ice Wolves made the most of their limited opportunities on the ensuing rush.

Chloe Trotter banged home Jocelyn Osborn's bouncing rebound on the edge of the crease past Claire Hicks with 4:27 left in the opening frame to give the vastly-outplayed visitors a 1-0 lead.

The opportunistic Ice Wolves made it 2-0 when a deflection off Ashlea Whyte's shin pad bounced inside the left post past Hicks with 2:40 to go before second intermission.

Kingston parlayed a pair of fortuitous playoff bounces into a two-goal lead heading into the final frame and the rest was left to Reid.

The Ice Wolves goaltender was peppered by so many Panther pucks that her white jersey was blackened with innumerable vulcanized rubber smudges. She saved most of her Game 2 magic for the third period where she turned aside 19 of 20 shots to stymie the home side's Herculean efforts to notch the equalizer.

The entertaining best-of-five series continues in Kingston with Game 3 on Friday night and Game 4 on Saturday afternoon.

**By Jim Stewart**