

## Junior Panthers swat Oakville Hornets 4-2 to finish regular season on 14-game winning streak



Amber Esterbrooks tallied two goals and Klaire Essex and Avery Johnston scored one each as the U22 Central York Panthers defeated the Oakville Hornets 4-2 on Sunday afternoon at SARC.

The comeback victory extended the Junior squad's winning streak to 14.

In a poignant pre-game ceremony, the red-hot hockey club honored its fourteen graduating players?much to the delight of over 200 fans assembled in the stands and mezzanine. Twenty-eight jerseys, representing the honorees' respective journeys through youth hockey, adorned the east end zone plexi-glass.

CYGHA President Mark Dubeau presided over Seniors' Day and introduced each member of the Class of 2025 with a brief bio, arranged a group photo with the coaching staff on the red carpet, and each graduating player was presented with a bouquet of flowers.

Esterbrooks, a four-year Panther veteran, described the best part of Seniors' Day: ?This morning, we were asked to wait outside the arena until all 14 of us were walked into our dressed-up locker room together. It was pretty emotional there and at the beginning of the game. I've been here for four years with Erica [Buckley] and Klaire [Essex] who are such great friends.?

The Panthers came out roaring after the pre-game ceremony with honorees Esterbrooks and Captain Cheyenne Degeer creating scoring opportunities seconds into the game, but Hornet goaltender Charlotte Payne was up to the task.

Payne stymied the Panthers on January 4 with a 45-save performance and blanked Central York 1-0 in Oakville?one of the few losses the Juniors suffered in 2025. Payne's work in the first period was equally-spectacular to her heroics in early-January and the visitors fed off their goalie's capacity to repel the prowling Panthers.

The Hornets put a damper on the Seniors' Day celebrations when Samantha Tingey got free in the slot and fired a puck past Central York goaltender Izzy Whynot at 9:44 to give the visitors a 1-0 lead.

Sixty-three seconds later, Sadie D'Angela fired a wrist shot from the left circle that flew past Whynot and nestled in the twine. D'Angela jumped in the air in celebration, was mobbed by her Hornet teammates, and it appeared that the Panthers' winning streak was in jeopardy.

However, Esterbrooks curbed Oakville's enthusiasm when she took a crisp pass from Alessia Stoikos, created open space, and fired a low shot that clanged off the back base of the net to pull the Panthers to within one with less than three minutes to play in the opening frame. The speedy Central York forward described her 16th of the season: "I got a great pass from Alessia. I could see their goalie was getting ready for a high shot so I went five-hole and it went right through into the back of the net."

In the opening minutes of the second period, Whynot prevented the Hornets from finding the back of the net with a series of sensational saves, including two breakaway beauties, to keep the Panthers close.

Sustained pressure by Central York kept the Hornets hemmed in their own end for much of the latter half of the period, but Payne made a series of point blank saves to preserve Oakville's one-goal lead.

After a scoreless second period in which the goalies starred, Degeer earned her 30th assist of the season when she fed Avery Johnston who found open space between the circles and rifled one over Payne 1:12 into the final frame to tie the game 2-2.

Esterbrooks described her team's rally and the importance of Johnston's early goal.

"Our team feeds off energy. We were cheering after the tying goal and we had played so well to end the second period that we were excited to get back on the ice to start the third."

The Panthers' forechecking was relentless after Johnston's tying goal and midway through the period, the pressure paid off. Stoikos—who played a strong 200-foot game versus the Hornets—fired a wrist shot from between the circles and Assistant Captain Klaire Essex tipped the puck past Payne to give the Panthers their first lead of the game at 10:23.

Central York created some third period suspense when a pair of Panthers—Keira Johnson and Erica Buckley—paraded to the penalty box at 8:15 and 7:00 to provide the Hornets with a 5-on-3 power play.

However, the stellar defensive play of Degeer, Rhaea Flint, and Zoe Li held the fort, picked up their teammates in the sin bin, and protected Central York's slim lead.

With 2:45 remaining in the game, Esterbrooks's forceful backhander off the left wing handcuffed Payne to give the surging Panthers an insurance goal to extend the team's winning streak to 14 games. The speedy Central York forward described her 17th of the campaign: "I was trying to switch to my forehand as I was driving to the net, but I was still able to get the shot away and the backhand fooled her on the way in."

On Friday night at the Galt Arena Gardens, Johnston scored two goals, Degeer contributed two assists, and the Junior Panthers won their thirteenth in a row when they roiled the Cambridge Rivulettes 4-2.

After a scoreless first period, Johnston got the Panthers on the board with helpers earned by Clara Williams and Degeer. It was Degeer's 29th assist of the season as she held down third place in the OWHL scoring race with a two-point night in Galt.

Two consecutive second period goals by Cambridge secured a 2-1 lead for the home side, but Annabella Van Berkel's unassisted power play marker with thirteen seconds left in the middle frame pulled the Panthers even. It was Van Berkel's eighth goal in her last eight games.

Fifty-nine seconds into the third period, Johnston fired her second goal of the game and 12th of the season. The Panther forward's game-winning, power play marker was assisted by Degeer and Klaire Essex. Mackenzie Cotey's goal four minutes later made it 4-2. Amy Clements and Elizabeth Janovski earned assists on Cotey's 5th of the season.

Samantha Whittle earned the road win—blocking 23 of 25 shots. Central York outshot Cambridge 41-25.

**By Jim Stewart**