

Junior Panthers sweep three-game homestand with wins over Burlington Barracudas, Oakville Hornets, and OHA Mavericks

The Central York Panthers' three-game home-stand yielded two regulation wins and one shootout win at SARC to vault the rebuilt squad into third place in the 25-team OWSA U22 Elite Division.

The Junior Panthers eked out an exciting 2-1 shootout decision over the Burlington Barracudas on Wednesday night via Annabella Van Berkel's highlight reel goal. On Saturday afternoon, Van Berkel's three-point game paced Central York to a 5-2 win over the Oakville Hornets. On Sunday afternoon, Audrey Martone's natural hat trick led the Panthers to a 6-3 come-from-behind victory over the OHA Mavericks to complete a productive 8-point week.

Wednesday's tilt versus the Barracudas was decided by Van Berkel's climactic third round shootout marker. The speedy Panther sped down the right wing, cut dramatically to her left toward the net, and fired the puck high stick side that rang off the pipe and behind Burlington goaltender Mackenzie Ferguson to win the game and elicit a spirited celly by her teammates.

After five players from both sides had failed to put the biscuit in the basket during the shootout, Panthers' Head Coach Steve Dempsey assessed his talented forward's emphatic goal: "Annabella went to the Team Canada camp. There was a reason she was our third shooter. She's one of the few players in the league that can overwhelm a goalie. She did that tonight."

Van Berkel's heroics would not have been possible without a clutch power play goal by Panther teammate Anastasia Trifon in the final minute of the third period which tied the game 1-1.

Coach Dempsey was impressed with the turn of events and his rebuilt team's performance, despite some rough patches versus Burlington.

"We'll have to find different ways to win. This win is something we'll be able to draw on later in the season. We see glimpses of a good team emerging and we have the ability to play at a high level. We struggled tonight to get connected and it was very choppy at times. We made line changes on the weekend to prepare for this game. It's also a tight 48-game schedule this year with the league expanding and we could use more practice time."

After a scoreless first period, the Barracudas struck first when Addison Butler's power play goal gave the visitors a 1-0 lead at 12:09 of the middle frame. Burlington clung to their one-goal lead for over 28 minutes. With exactly 44.8 seconds left on the clock, Trifon skillfully redirected Lily Paisley's shot from the left point past Ferguson to give Central York their sought-after equalizer.

Ferguson had stymied the Panthers' high-scoring offence through fifty-nine minutes, blocking all 32 shots faced in regulation until she yielded Trifon's second of the season.

Equally-noteworthy was the performance of Panthers' goaltender Claire Hicks who was masterful in the shootout by repelling all three Barracuda breakaways.

Coach Dempsey applauded his netminder's work between the pipes: "I'm happy for her. She went through a tough stretch. She's also settling in with a very new team. Claire shut [Burlington] down in the shootout so our scorers could come through."

On Saturday afternoon, Central York trailed Oakville 1-0 after twenty minutes of play, but the Panthers' offence shifted into high gear with three consecutive second period goals by Van Berkel, Martone, and Demi Lazarou to stake the home side to a 3-1 lead heading into the second intermission.

A power play goal by Oakville's Maya Valeri cut Central York's lead to 3-2 less than five minutes into the final frame, but Panther forward Zoe Ordanis restored the home side's two-goal margin with just under eight minutes to go.

With 1:49 remaining on the clock, Van Berkel fired her second of the game into an empty net to complete her three-point game and clinch the game for the red-hot Panthers.

On Sunday afternoon versus the Mavericks, Panthers forward Ellie Lewington's goal two minutes into the second period broke a scoreless tie. Martone and Keira Johnson earned assists.

After Mavericks' forward Sophie Dedobbelaer tied it 1-1 at 16:09, Martone's unassisted marker restored the Panthers' one-goal lead.

However, the Mavericks took a 3-2 lead with two markers less than one minute apart by Jade Pelland.

The Panthers' vaunted offence kicked into high gear after Pelland's pair of goals for the Mavericks and Martone was at the centre of the storm surge.

Martone's second goal of the period tied the game at 4:31.

Six seconds later, the Panthers struck again when Demi Lazarou's unassisted marker restored the Panthers' one-goal lead.

Martone earned her natural hat trick?once again assisted by Johnson and Lewington?as she fired her third goal of the period past Mavericks' goaltender Sonja Reed.

Central York's marksmanship was on display in the middle frame when the Panthers scored five goals on seventeen shots. Impressively, Martone made the scoresheet for four of her team's five goals. Abby Pak closed the Panthers' scoring midway through the third period to provide the margin of victory?the Panthers' fifth in a row.

In a battle for second place in the U22 division, the Junior Panthers host the Barrie Sharks on Wednesday, October 8. Puck drop at SARC is 7.40 p.m. With the trio of victories, Central York improved their record to 7-1-0-0 for 21 points?trailing second-place Barrie by only two points with two games in hand.

By Jim Stewart