

Junior Tigers drop 7-2 decision to persistent Panthers

Thomas Leone and Gianfranco Rosella tallied a goal each for the Junior Tigers, but the Pickering Panthers used a pair of productive periods to defeat Aurora 7-2 on Friday night at the ACC.

The navy-clad, maroon-trimmed Panthers jumped out to a 3-0 first period lead when Landon Stevens, Matt Indovina, and Evan Elliott each lit the lamp over a twelve-minute stretch.

Rosella, who earned Third Star of the Game honors as selected by OJHL staff, explained his team's letdown in the first frame.

"We took some undisciplined penalties and they capitalized on the nice goals they set up. Even though we were down by three, we were still hungry to come back."

Indeed, the Tigers played a strong second period. The home side set the pace and dominated play in the opening nine minutes. Midway through the middle frame, Aurora's diligence was rewarded when Thomas Leone's tip of Martin Maryanovski's blue line blast flipped high over the shoulder of Panthers' goalie Anthony Sciere and into the netting to narrow the visitors' lead to 3-1.

Charlie Hotles earned his 17th assist of the season on Leone's deft deflection.

Rosella described the Tigers' resurgence in the second period and into the final frame: "Coming off the big win versus Lindsay and even though we got down by three, we just went to re-set. We have a lot of speed and talent on this team and we used it. We were the better team at the end of the first period and during the second period."

The Tigers were also gifted a 4-on-3 power play when Pickering defender Marco Costante drew a hooking penalty at 10:12 after coincidental roughing minors were meted out to Elliott and Tigers' forward Cayden Smith at 9:50.

With the extra space, the Tigers prowled throughout the power play, creating high quality scoring chances, but Sciere served as Pickering's best penalty killer—especially when he snagged sharpshooter Javian Nei's one-timer.

It was a turning point in the game and Rosella rued his squad's inability to beat Sciere again during the second period.

"We created lots of scoring chances, but didn't capitalize, especially on the power plays."

Capitalizing on the power play became a recurrent theme in this OJHL contest.

One second before the Tigers killed off Avery Grant's four-minute minor for kneeing to start the third period, Costante's wrist shot from just inside the blue line was deflected by Jake Mallory in the slot and past Kraus to restore the Panthers' three-goal lead at 4:31.

Two minutes later, Costante earned his third assist of the game and secured First Star of the Game honors when he lasered a pass from the point to Peter Smith who roofed his 15th of the season just under the bar and above Kraus's shoulder glove side to make it 5-1.

Despite the four-goal deficit, Aurora kept attacking and Cole Crawford rang one off the right post on a breakaway, eliciting groans from the Tigers' faithful over the team's lack of puck luck. However, Aurora was gifted with another two-man advantage and this time the Tigers capitalized.

Less than 14 seconds into Pickering's second penalty to create a 5-on-3 advantage, Rosella banged in a rebound from the slot. The speedy centre's one-timer knuckled over a sprawled Sciere and into the back of the net.

Rosella described his sixth of the season: "To be honest, I didn't see it go in. It was in a scramble in front of the net. It was a nice set up to control the play."

Rosella's marker narrowed the Panthers' lead to 5-2 and earned assists for Johnathan Cirone and Paul Mazanik.

However, playoff-bound Pickering closed out the period effectively when Ty Robar sniped one off the left wing to make it 6-2 for the visitors and Alex Colangelo chipped one over Kraus with 3:16 remaining to provide the margin of victory for the third-place Panthers (28-12-2-2).

With 12 games remaining in the regular season, the Tigers' playoff hopes dimmed a bit when the eighth-place Lindsay Muskies (16-21-5-2) defeated the Caledon Admirals 4-3 on Friday night to move nine points ahead of tenth-place Aurora (14-28-0-2) in the OJHL East standings.

The Tigers travel to Lindsay to take on the Muskies on Friday, February 6 in a must-win game for Aurora.

By Jim Stewart