

Junior Tigers fans can expect 'big, strong, aggressive hockey' in upcoming season

By Jake Courtepatte

The 2016-17 Junior A Aurora Tigers will bring a brand of gritty, hardworking hockey to the Aurora Community Centre this winter, a big shift in strategy from previous teams, according to team owner Jim Thomson.

'When I watched our team last year, we weren't physical,' said the second-year owner. 'We need to be tough to play against. I think we got taken advantage of a lot of the time, and this year we've brought in the physicality while still focusing on skill.'

Thomson compares the new-look Tigers' brand of hockey to that of the NHL's Los Angeles Kings: a comparison that, if correct, would certainly translate to success for the junior hockey club.

On a local level, the club looked to the success of the Kingston Voyageurs and Wellington Dukes, both of whom went 8-0 against the Tigers last season, with the Dukes sending the Tigers home early in the postseason.

'Both are very physical, in-your-face teams. And it works.'

After posting a 28-17-1-8 record in the 2015-16 regular season, the fifth-place Tigers faced the Dukes in the first playoff round, falling in six games with an overtime clincher in Game Six. It was the second year in a row the Tigers failed to live up to postseason expectations, after making a run to the league final three years ago.

Though a highly-skilled team with one of the best offensive outputs in the Northeast Conference of the OJHL, Thomson admits last year's Tigers did not match up size-wise to many of Aurora's rivals. Team brass began the transition shortly after the season ended last year, sending Drake Board, the 5'7" team-leading scorer, to Cobourg for Austin Kozluk, a 6'3" left winger.

All in all the Tigers turned over 21 players this season, a number indicative of the high turnover rate of junior hockey. Only two players are returnees, defenceman James Thomson and forward Matt Tozer.

Thomson and his team hope to have found the right balance of physicality and skill with the new group, which includes the likes of Mel Melconian, who is coming off of a 60-goal year in Midget AAA.

'If you're not an 'everyday-er, you can't be on this hockey team. And that goes for blocking shots, finishing your checks, going in the corners—that's the kind of team we're building here. We want to play big, strong, aggressive hockey, and I'm not talking fighting, I'm talking toughness.'

Preseason action began last weekend for the Tigers, a home-and-home series with the Lindsay Muskies. While the Muskies earned the win Friday on their own home ice, the Tigers won a hard-fought battle at the ACC on Sunday, coming out on top 6-5 with the game-winning goal coming in the final minute of regulation from Evan Spencer, a 16-year old prospect from Quebec school hockey.

The Tigers open the regular season against the Dukes on September 9, with the home opener set for September 11. A commemorative pre-game ceremony will honour a pair of New York Fire Department firefighters who were affected by the September 11, 2001 attacks, flown in by the Tigers for the game.

First 500 fans will also receive a Tigers tee shirt.

Sunday home games will be the norm this season, moving from Fridays. Thomson said the idea was born out of a sense of nostalgia.

'On Fridays, you get your die-hards, but it's hard to fill a rink in the winter on a Friday night after a long work week. There was a day when Sunday nights, you filled the arena in Aurora. People told me it was the thing to do.'

?I know that, as a parent, I'm looking for something to do. We want to bring that back to Aurora.?

The Tigers will be teaming up with local restaurants for a promotion called ?Every Sunday is Mother's Day? this season, where families can take their mother's out to dinner and a hockey game.

?It's Sunday, you can treat your mom so she doesn't have to cook?games will be at 7.00 p.m., so the kids can get home in time to get to bed for school the next day. It'll be a nice family outing.?

The promotion of the season, however, is for the kids. Every Aurora and Newmarket minor hockey player, as well as soccer player, receive free season passes to the Tigers.

For more information, visit www.auroratigers.pointstreaksites.com.