

## Junior Tigers? losing streak reaches eight with one-sided back-to-back home ice losses to Haliburton and Lindsay

There were two bright lights on a dismal weekend for the Aurora Junior Tigers.

The first was the Teddy Bear Toss on Friday evening following a masterful goal by Paul Mazanik versus Haliburton that narrowed the Tigers' first period deficit to 2-1 and netted hundreds of toys for needy kids in time for Christmas.

The OWSA U22 Central York Junior Panthers assisted the Tigers with the on-ice collection and Aurora's Junior hockey clubs posed for a celebratory group photo at centre ice with The Grinch at the wheel of the Tigers' promotional truck.

The second bright moment took place on Saturday night when the U16BB Tigers got the red carpet treatment and unveiled their 2025 Ontario Championship Banner in the rafters of the ACC prior to the Junior Tigers' tilt with Lindsay.

Other than these memorable moments, which underscored the rich hockey history of Aurora and the commendable community service ethic of the Tigers, the home side's losing streak reached five since the shocking exit of Captain Simon Howard and Assistant Captain Luke Howard to the league-leading Toronto Patriots on December 1.

On Friday night, Haliburton's 6'5", 225-pound power forward Isaac Larmand could not be contained by the Tigers. The Midland resident's impressive hat trick spurred the hard-hitting Huskies to a 6-2 win.

On Saturday night, the Muskies scored two spirit-crushing shorthanded goals while killing off a five-minute major penalty in the middle frame and Lindsay skated to a 7-1 win over the listless Tigers.

Both games had significance in the OJHL standings for the ninth-place Tigers. To qualify for the playoffs, home ice victories over the sixth-place Huskies and the eighth-place Muskies were mid-season "must-win" games for the Tigers.

Instead, Aurora's Junior A club was outscored 13-3 and is soldiering through a winless month in which they've lost to Stouffville, Trenton, and Wellington before getting sideswiped by Haliburton and Lindsay.

Prior to trading their leading scorer and an NCAA commit to the Patriots and depleting their on-ice leadership team by 50%, the Tigers finished November with three consecutive losses to OJHL powerhouses Milton, Toronto, and Pickering.

On Friday night, the Huskies jumped out to a 2-0 lead on Larmand's 13th of the season 1:10 into the contest and Christopher Brydges's shot from the blue line that eluded Aurora netminder Owen Byers at 11:08.

The Tigers rallied when Mazanik fired a shot from a tough angle that beat Huskie goaltender Owen Edwards short side. Speedy centre Gianfranco Rosella's selfless play along the boards earned him his 14th assist of the season.

Mazanik's marker and the Teddy Bear Toss steeled the resolve of the home side. At 9:47 of the second period, Anrijs Bundzenieks fired his 10th of the season past Edwards?the third-ranked netminder in the OJHL?to tie the game 2-2.

However, Brydges's second of the game restored the Huskies lead at 14:53 when the mobile defender finished a pass from Ronen Macfarlane.

Larmand put the game out of reach in the third period when he scored at 5:09 and 7:45. The personable Huskie described his hat trick goal that capped a brilliant passing play by Nate Taylor and Brady Coe: "We had a three on two. Nate did a great job getting the puck and Brody found my tape."

He credited his team's adaptability following a flurry of trades during which the improved Huskies has gone 9-2 since shaking up the roster: "All the new players have bought into our systems. We're ready to make a run now as an older team. Our PK has played very well; the team is winning games in our division which are important."

Larmand also applauded the arrival of Edwards who was secured from the Rebellion on October 31 after earning OJHL Goaltender of the Month honors for King: "We're really happy that he's here. He's played well when we needed him and he's kept us in games. Owen's provided the help we needed, especially when our main goalie was injured."

On Saturday night, the raising of the U16 Provincial Championship banner inspired the Tigers as Assistant Captain Cayden Smith fired his 15th of the season past Muskies netminder George Cote at 2:16 of the first period.

However, the Muskies responded with three consecutive goals by Ethan Kindree, Kaden Koutroulides, and Kai Williams to stake the visitors to a 3-1 lead after twenty minutes of play.

Williams' goal chased Aurora goaltender Owen Byers from the game after surrendering three goals on nine shots and introduced backup Lucas Carpino to OJHL action. The Tigers' goaltending situation was exacerbated last week when star netminder Matthew Humphries was called up to the OHL's Oshawa Generals.

Carpino, who blocked 27 of the 31 shots he faced in his league debut, was selected as the Third Star of the Game by OJHL staff.

Two of the goals that eluded Carpino were breakaway goals that the Muskies scored shorthanded while killing off Maxwell Howlett's head contact major penalty he incurred for flattening Tigers forward Marcus Carter.

A brawl broke out in defense of the fallen Carter as Jonathan Scott gamely stepped up and took on Kindree in a neutral zone dustup. Both were ejected from the game and Quinlan Clair of the Tigers and Logan Brown of the Muskies earned roughing minors for joining the neutral zone scrap.

Instead of galvanizing the Tigers, the major penalty to the head-hunting Howlett led to short-handed, backbreaking goals by Ajay Rai and Braxton Meyers at 6:35 and 8:11 to build a 6-1 Muskies lead and deflate the home side. Rai added his 16th of the season at 17:54 of the third period to close the scoring.

The Tigers welcome the Buffalo Junior Sabres on Friday and the nationally-ranked Collingwood Blues on Saturday. Puck drop at the ACC is 7 p.m.

**By Jim Stewart**