

## Junior Tigers tally four goals in final frame to down Wellington Dukes 5-3

Newly-acquired Johnathan Cirone scored two goals in the third period to lead the Aurora Tigers to a 5-3 win over the Wellington Dukes on Saturday night ? much to the delight of an animated crowd at the ACC.

Cirone's short-handed goal 7:34 into the final frame catalyzed his club's comeback victory.

The fast-skating forward cut in from the right wing and beat Dukes' goaltender Colby Booth-Housego high glove side from inside the faceoff circle to stake Aurora to a 3-2 lead.

The resident of Barrie credited his shortie to the skill of Tigers' top scorer Cayden Smith?who earned three assists versus the Dukes ? and the vocal encouragement of veteran defenseman Avery Grant.

?Smitty gave me a great pass. Granter [Avery Grant] had told me to get there. The crowd was loud after the goal and it gave the team energy.?

Cirone's first goal as a Tiger since being acquired in mid-December from the Pickering Panthers revved up the lively fans who were treated to an entertaining OJHL game.

His second goal in an Aurora uniform came with 34.6 seconds left in the game when Cirone retrieved a fortuitous bounce off the neutral zone boards on a clearing pass from Grant, got behind the Wellington defense corps, and slid the puck into the empty Dukes' cage.

Cirone?who accrued 16 points in 27 games with the Panthers?had an oracular moment on the bench before he took to the ice to fend off Wellington's 6-on-5 advantage: ?I was telling the boys that the empty net goal was going to happen. I feel like a fortune teller now. I was in the right place at the right time.?

Cirone's sense of good timing was reflective of the club's best home ice effort of the season. Trailing 2-1 heading into the final frame, Aurora got the equalizer at 6:19 when Flint Firebird forward Charlie Hotles notched his seventh goal as a Tiger?set up by Smith and Anris Bundzenieks. After the hard-working Bundzenieks missed a wide open net by inches seconds earlier, the big power forward secured the puck in his own end on the ensuing rush and hit Smith on the tape.

The high-scoring Assistant Captain set up Hotles speeding down the right wing. Hotles fired a howitzer from just inside the right faceoff circle beating Booth-Housego cleanly and bulging the twine to tie the game 2-2.

Seventy-five seconds later, Cirone sniped his shortie from almost the same spot as Hotles to give the home side its first lead of the game. However, Zachary Carrier's wrist shot from the left point at 8:38 sailed past Tigers' netminder Matthew Humphries who was screened on the play. Carrier's 22nd of the season tied the game 3-3.

After the tying goal by the Dukes, the Tigers showed much resilience as well as a deft scoring touch in their first game of 2026. Less than two minutes after Carrier's tying goal, Jamie Buscarini's breakout pass was cradled on the blade by Thomas Leone who fired the puck from a bad angle below the goal line that found just enough space short side to beat a surprised Booth-Housego. Leone's dramatic game-winner restored Aurora's lead to 4-3.

None of the goal-scoring heroics by Hotles, Cirone, or Leone would have led to Saturday's satisfying outcome if not for the 38 saves made by Humphries.

The Aurora goaltender was especially spectacular in the final minutes of the third period?making two goalmouth saves to rob the visitors. Humphries sealed the five-hole with 58.4 seconds left to preserve the home side's precarious lead with the Dukes pouring it

on with their net empty and an extra skater unleashed in the Tigers' zone.

After Humphries foiled another point blank shot by the Dukes and smothered the rebound, the visitors called a timeout with 29.0 seconds left. Grant's clearing pass came off the penalty box boards at a crazy angle and on to Cirone's tape who slid the puck into the empty cage. It felt like the roof shuddered a bit at the ACC due to the crowd's raucous celebration.

Cirone praised Humphries's game-saving performance: "He was crazy tonight. He's such a great goalie in this league and he's so far above this level for his age. He shows up for us every night. It was great we got some goals tonight to support him."

Cirone noted that the same effort on Saturday night would be required in Markham on Sunday afternoon: "We have to bring the same energy. We have to hit anything that moves and take the play to them."

Unfortunately, the Tigers couldn't establish a two-game winning streak to usher in the New Year. Philip Govedaris fired a hat trick to lead Markham to a narrow 3-1 win over Aurora at Centennial Arena.

Govedaris's goals in the first and third period staked the Royals to a 2-0 lead, but Aurora forward Paul Mazanik narrowed the Tigers' deficit to one goal with 2:56 left on the clock. Hotles earned his 10th assist of the season on Mazanik's marker.

With Humphries pulled for the extra attacker, Govedaris completed his hat trick by slipping the puck into the empty net with 54 seconds left in the game.

The Tigers will try to carry their positive momentum into a four-game road trip with visits to Trenton on Tuesday, Lindsay on Friday, North York on Sunday, and Haliburton next Friday.

**By Jim Stewart**