

Kingston kiboshes Junior Panthers? OWHL playoff series comeback with dramatic 3-2 Shootout victory

In a stunning upset on Saturday afternoon at SARC, the #10-seeded Kingston Ice Wolves edged the #7-seeded Central York Panthers 3-2 in a Shootout to capture their OWHL opening round playoff series 3 games to 1.

Game 4 of the series required a 5-minute, 3-on-3 overtime period and a 3-round shootout to determine a winner.

Jerika Spry's shootout goal sealed the deal for Kingston and evoked a collective victory howl by the Ice Wolves.

The screeching visitors poured on to the ice to mob Spry and celebrated their team's upset victory over a red-hot Panthers team that rolled into playoffs on a fourteen-game winning streak.

The Ice Wolves eked their way into overtime when Kingston defender Samantha Keil fired a wrist shot from the left point that knuckled on its way through a crowd and eluded Panthers' goaltender Izzy Whynot with 6:08 left on the clock.

Keil's 60-foot marker tied the game 2-2 and ostensibly stole a regulation time victory from the home side.

Kingston's series-clinching win on Saturday afternoon was even more shocking because Central York built a 2-1 lead with a pair of third period goals six minutes apart by gutsy offensive stars Avery Johnston and Amber Esterbrooks.

The dramatic markers solved Ice Wolves' backup goaltender Abigayle Parkinson who had kept the home side scoreless for 47 minutes. Additionally, the Panthers dominated the Ice Wolves the night before in a 3-0 win. The final three-goal margin on Friday flattered the visitors.

Panthers' Head Coach Steve Dempsey acknowledged that Saturday's defeat was very tough for his hockey club: "When we got up 2-1 late in the game and then lost in a shootout it's the definition of a devastating loss. The fact that these players are so young makes it very difficult for them to put the loss in perspective, but it's definitely a teaching moment for them. Winning the league championship was always the big goal for the team and we've never been on the Consolation side of the OWHL championships during my time as a Coach of the Panthers. Right now, it's pretty difficult for them. They're devastated. The challenge will be to motivate our players for this weekend's games and prepare for the Provincials in April."

After dropping the first two games of the best-of-five series in Kingston, the plucky Panthers staved off elimination on Friday night with one of their most complete games of the season.

Veteran Central York forward Erica Buckley, in her fourth year with the Panthers and committed to the OUA Carleton Ravens, reflected on her team's dominant W in a post-game interview on Friday: "We were desperate tonight and we had to prove ourselves as the better team. We really needed the win, especially after the last two games in Kingston where we were stunned by the results and we found ourselves chasing them around the ice. Tonight, we played our game and followed our coaching staff's plan."

Central York poured it on the Ice Wolves from the opening faceoff on Friday night and outshot the visitors 30-6 in the first two periods of play. The red-clad Panthers came out firing and forechecking with the kind of urgency one would expect from a team facing elimination.

After a series of near-misses including a struck goal post, a pair of high-scoring Panthers combined to give Central York a 1-0 lead at 5:45 of the first period. Brown University commit Zoe Li, the club's top-scoring defender, feathered a pass to 20-goal scorer Annabella Van Berkel.

The rookie forward's wrist shot from between the circles whistled past Aneta Senkova and nestled in the net strings to give the

Panthers their first lead of the series.

The Panthers used their speed advantage to win puck chases throughout the game and the swift-skating squad was rewarded midway through the second period when Esterbrooks blazed past two Ice Wolves off the right wing and fired a shot that generated a juicy rebound off Senkova.

Buckley collected the carom in the slot and slammed home the Panthers' second goal in a timely, opportunistic manner.

Buckley, who tallied 17 goals during the regular season, described the vital insurance marker: "It came off a good face off win and we ran a set play. I lost my check in the neutral zone and I knew Amber was going to beat both players to the outside with her speed. I knew she'd get a shot away so I just went to the net and fired in the rebound."

The Panthers closed out the scoring on a perfect set-up orchestrated by Cheyenne Degeer.

The St. Lawrence University commit created open space by cutting towards the circles off the left wing and placed a gift-wrapped drop pass on Clara Williams's tape. Williams rifled the puck past a screened Senkova to put the Panthers up 3-0 midway through the final frame.

After the Panthers skated off the ice on Friday night, it appeared that they had found the winning formula versus the pesky visitors and they had solved Senkova who backstopped the Ice Wolves to victories in Games 1 and 2 in Kingston.

Although the Panthers were eliminated from the OWHL Top Eight Championship playoffs, Coach Dempsey outlined his squad's remaining tournaments: "This weekend, we'll be in the OWHL's 16-team Consolation tournament at the Scotiabank Pond. We'll play shorter games compared to the Championship side—two on Friday, one on Saturday, and there will be a Gold medal game on Sunday.

"This will be our first time on this side of the tournament. We'll have our full team available, except for Elizabeth Janovski who suffered a concussion and is subject to the national "Return to Play" protocols."

In addition to icing a team at the Consolations, the Panthers will compete at the Provincials April 10-13 at Mississauga Iceland. Coach Dempsey noted that his team's championship pedigree will be an asset after Saturday's devastating loss: "Four of our players won a Provincial championship when they played for Peterborough four years ago. Cheyenne Degeer, Avery Johnston, Clara Williams, and Rhaea Flint were all scouted at that tournament. They know how to win at that level."

Onward.

By Jim Stewart