

Lunney and Clarke set their sights on a Provincial Championship for the Central York Panthers

The Central York Panthers were all business when they hit the ice at SARC last Wednesday night.

Head Coach Steve Dempsey and his coaching staff put their team through their paces to prepare for the Provincial Championships in mid-April. The Panthers organization hopes to build on their team's recent success at the OWHL U22 Elite playoffs (see story at [theauroran.com](#)) where they earned the top seed by going undefeated in the round robin before being edged in the semifinals by the Whitby Wolves.

Veteran Panthers Abby Lunney and Hannah Clarke have had successful seasons in both their Panther jerseys?the team finished the regular season 28-10-5?and their Team Ontario jerseys in which they captured bronze at the 2023 Canada Winter Games.

Their hockey futures are similarly bright. Lunney has committed to play in September 2023 for Nipissing University in North Bay where former NHL player Darren Turcotte is the Head Coach. She felt a ?perfect connection? with Coach Turcotte who ?commits to his players for the full five years.?

Clarke, a smooth-skating defenseman, is taking a gap year to ?get stronger and faster? and will play for the Panthers in 2023-24. After her final season in Aurora, Clarke will head off to the US in September 2024 to play for the NCAA Division 1 Providence College Friars in Providence, Rhode Island.

Lunney and Clarke took time after the Panthers' team lift??the final one of the season??and before their important pre-championship practice at SARC to discuss their success at the OWHL playoffs, the 2022-23 regular season, the upcoming provincial championships, the Canada Winter Games, and the importance of the recent IIHF game in Aurora.

The Auroran: Describe your team's undefeated run in the round robin at the U22 Elite OWHL championships in early April.

Lunney: ?We played our best hockey of the year. I thought we had a team-first mentality and we gave extra shifts to the hot scorers. It was a positive step forward for the team.?

Clarke: ?Our energy was great. Everyone was enjoying the games and enjoying their teammates' success. It was good team-building.?

The Auroran: What was the highlight of the regular season?

Lunney: ?Building connections with teammates, learning from adversity, and learning from experiences so we could become better hockey players.?

Clarke: ?The bus trips and the bonding, especially the Karaoke going to Cornwall.?

The Auroran: What are the team's plans for the upcoming Provincial championships in Mississauga?

Lunney: ?Getting Ws against the Top 12 OWHL Elite teams at the championships.?

Clarke: ?We're prepping and building on our good weekend at the OWHL championships. Losing to Whitby will give us extra fire.?

The Auroran: What was your individual highlight from the Canada Winter Games?

Lunney: ?Repping Ontario and playing with the top players, especially the ones we've played against in the OWHL. Learning to play

with them?not against them?was a good experience.?

Clarke: ?Representing Ontario and meeting all the skilled players from across Canada was great, but I really liked the atmosphere, too. I also liked representing the province in our game versus Newfoundland in the quarterfinals and celebrating a birthday with a W.?

The Auroran: What was the significance of the IIHF game played at the ACC this weekend in terms of its impact on the Panthers program?

Lunney: ?I think it will elevate and grow the game for the girls in the area. Seeing the growth of female hockey would be a good impact.?

Clarke: ?It will inspire females to see such great players [from Sweden and Switzerland] playing on a local rink in their own backyard.?

As we finish our pre-practice interview at SARC, a 10-year-old Panther yells ?Hi Abby? and Lunney asks her young admirer: ?How was practice tonight?? An easy-going dialogue ensues and it becomes abundantly clear through this random interaction in the SARC lobby that Abby and Hannah are not only admired as players to look up to, but they are also seen as mentors to the young Panthers that share the same ice surfaces and passion for the game.

NOTE: For more on the Panthers' season, visit bitly.ws/CQX9.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter