

Martone and Hicks lead Junior Panthers to ?huge? playoff series victory over Kingston Ice Wolves

The Central York Panthers eliminated the Kingston Ice Wolves from the OWHL playoffs with back-to-back 2-1 and 3-1 victories on Friday and Saturday in The Limestone City.

The Panthers won the opening round series three games to one.

Central York U22 Coach Steve Dempsey described his club's series victory on the weekend as ?a huge win for the program on many levels.?

?We're an original program in the OWHL, but that was just the fourth playoff series won in the history of the Junior Panthers. After not winning a playoff series for many years, this gets us to the Elite Eight and puts the program on the map. All our players are going to get all kinds of attention from university coaches who were watching the games. My phone exploded with dozens of texts from university coaches minutes after we beat Kingston.?

The margin of victory over Kingston for Coach Dempsey's crew was razor-thin. The Panthers' 2-1 win on Friday was via the Shootout, the Panthers' third goal in Saturday afternoon's 3-1 victory was an empty netter, and Central York trailed both games 1-0 in the second period.

The lower-ranked Ice Wolves eliminated the Panthers from the OWHL playoffs in 2025 and looked to be on the verge of another upset on home ice after stealing Game 2 in Aurora to tie the series last Sunday.

However, Central York returned the favor against their divisional rival on Saturday, paced by Audrey Martone's two-goal performance and Claire Hicks's strong effort between the pipes. Hicks stopped 18 of the 19 shots she faced to stymie the Ice Wolves for the second consecutive game at Desjardins Invista Centre.

On Friday night, Hicks stopped 28 of 29 shots during regulation and was flawless in OT and the 3-round Shootout?stopping both shots she faced before Martone fired the game winner past Lilyana Reid in Round One to capture Game 3 of the series.

Coach Dempsey credited Hicks's big game performance as one of many significant factors that tipped the series in the Panthers' favor: ?It's a lot easier to coach in the playoffs when you get goaltending. Claire played great in both games. Kudos also to our players for accepting different roles. Due to injuries to our defense, our Captain Keira Johnson moved from forward to defense?a role she performed for us earlier in the season. She did a great job. We also worked on forechecking to be the difference maker in the series. I demanded from our players that they go full speed?making hard turns at the bottom of the circles and we created so many turnovers. We invested in being mentally tough at the start of the season and that really helped us when we fell behind 1-0 in both games on Friday and Saturday. We really challenged them to leave a big legacy for the program?to get back to the Elite Eight.?

Getting back to the Elite Eight did not look like a given last Sunday afternoon at SARC when the Panthers outshot the Ice Wolves 45-15, but lost 2-1. Reid turned aside 44 of the 45 shots she faced to accrue an incredible .978 SV%. Dozens of Reid's saves that afternoon were in the sensational category and it appeared she might steal the series.

However, on Friday night and Saturday afternoon in Kingston, Hicks stole the spotlight from Reid and backstopped her club to a pair of impressive road victories.

On Saturday afternoon in Game 4, Hicks was beaten by Kingston's Claire Chambers 35 seconds into the second period, but blocked all the shots she faced after that to give the Panthers the kind of netminding that wins playoff series.

Veteran Panther Elizabeth Janovski?with a helper from Captain Johnson?pulled Central York into a 1-1 tie at 11:13 of the middle

frame.

Martone scored the game-winner 8:45 into the third period?yielding a hard-earned assist for Abby Pak.

Coach Dempsey credited Pak for the diligent digging that created Martone's decisive tally.

?That goal was all Abby. She got away from two players in the corner ?they were both draped all over her?and she got Audrey the puck in the slot with a perfect tape-to-tape pass.?

With 2:39 remaining in the final frame and Reid pulled for an extra attacker, Martone scored again, this time on an unassisted empty netter to end the Ice Wolves' season.

On Friday night in Game 3, Karinne Jarmin beat Hicks 2:12 into the second period to give the home side a 1-0 lead, but Demi Lazarou pulled the Panthers even with 3:01 left in the middle frame. Central York outshot Kingston 12-11 in the third period, but Hicks and Reid kept opposing shooters off the scoreboard and continued their mastery in a scoreless OT?setting up Martone's heroics in the shootout.

The valiant Reid turned aside 39 of the 40 shots she faced in Game 3, but Hicks made the biggest saves of the game in the Shootout to put Kingston on the brink of elimination.

Coach Dempsey described the series-altering Shootout sequence.

?The winning goal was Audrey being Audrey. She went first and made some nice quick moves switching backhand to forehand. The goalie got impatient and went to pokecheck. Audrey's quick hands finished the goal perfectly. Berkie [Annabella Van Berkel] clinched it for us in the next round when she scored our second goal?she went five-hole right along the ice. Claire made both saves to give us the three-round Shootout win.?

By capturing the best-of-five series in Kingston, the seventh-seeded Panthers qualified for the OWHL Elite Eight Championship Weekend in Toronto.

Pool play for Central York will start on Thursday, March 26 at 3 p.m. versus the 2nd-seeded Mississauga Hurricanes at the Scotiabank Pond.

Game 2 on Friday, March 27 at 2:45 PM will be against the 3rd-seeded Durham West Lightning at the Chesswood Arena.

On Saturday, March 28 at 2:45, Game 3 will feature a tilt with the 6th-seeded Burlington Barracudas.

The first-place clubs from both pools will play for the Gold Medal on Sunday, March 29 at 1:30 and the second-place clubs from both pools will be play for the Bronze Medal at 12:45 at the Scotiabank Pond.

By Jim Stewart