

Martone, Pak, Lewington, Van Berkel, and Hicks lead Junior Panthers to 4-0 win over Toronto Aeros



Audrey Martone, Abby Pak, Ellie Lewington, and Annabella Van Berkel scored one goal each to lead the Central York Panthers to a tidy 4-0 win over the Toronto Aeros on Saturday afternoon at SARC.

It was the Panthers' third consecutive win.

Claire Hicks, who made many sensational saves to earn her first shutout of the season, described the importance of the Junior Panthers' victory with three regular season games left: "It's all about preparing for the playoffs right now. Our coaches have told us that we have to play every game like it's a playoff game."

When Hicks was asked if the Panthers had rebounded from their five-game slump with three consecutive wins, she concurred: "100%. Part of this game is that all teams go through the ups and downs during a long season. We're in a good position for the playoffs and winning games like this one today is a plus for us."

The steady keeper described the team win and her 22-save shutout: "It's a good feeling. Our entire team is pushing hard. It's an awesome group of girls—they played so well in front of me."

After a scoreless first period, Hicks flashed the leather at 16:17 and bailed out the Panthers' power play when she prevented a shortie on a clearcut breakaway four minutes later. Hicks's big saves in the middle frame kept the white-jerseyed visitors from scoring first.

With nine minutes left in the middle frame, Martone made a marvelous move off the right wing to get past two defenders and another clever deke to pull Aeros goaltender Samantha Besner side-to-side to deposit the disc into the lower right corner of the net.

The Panthers' second-leading scorer described her 15th of the season: "It all started with our good effort in the D-Zone. We were able to get it out of our end and when I brought it into their zone, I saw that she stayed back in her net. I saw that she flinched on the deke so I could slide it in."

Martone, whose two-point performance led the team's offense, described the importance of the win over the Aeros: "We haven't been winning a lot lately, but we've put it all behind us. I thought we battled today. We worked as a team."

Seconds after Martone's go-ahead goal, Hicks bailed out her defensive corps again by repelling a dangerous 2-on-1 by the Aeros?kicking out her left pad to stop the doorstep one-timer.

The Panthers' netminder came up big again with 17 seconds left in a home side PK with a quick glove save to keep the Aeros off the scoreboard.

Buoyed by Hicks's heroics, Pak stole the puck at centre ice on an ensuing rush with the teams playing 4-on-4. The speedy centre took advantage of the extra space and time, barreled in from the right wing, deked Besner, and chipped it into the open net. Pak's brilliant unassisted goal was her 10th of the season and gave the Panthers a two-goal cushion with 3:16 remaining before second intermission.

Seven minutes into the third period, the Panthers pulled ahead 3-0.

Ellie Lewington delivered the knockout punch when she corralled a pass from Ella Frasca, burst in off the left wing, created space around an Aeros defender, and rifled a low wrist shot from the faceoff circle that beat Besner five-hole.

Three picturesque goals by the Panthers in front of a big Saturday afternoon crowd at SARC showcased the depth of scoring and talent in the U22 squad's lineup.

Panthers' leading scorer Van Berkel buried an empty netter with 1:18 left for her 32nd of the season?earning an assist for Martone who came precariously close to a ?Gordie Howe Hat Trick? versus the Aeros after drawing a four-minute Head Contact infraction in the second period. The feisty forward finished with a goal, an assist, and a pugnacious penalty?a tri-partite performance of which ?Mr. Hockey? and old school fans would approve.

The seventh-place Panthers (29-17-0) dropped a 5-0 decision to the 5th-place Stoney Creek Sabres on Sunday and will close their regular season on the road: in Oakville versus the 20th-place Hornets on Thursday; and in Whitby versus the 13th-place Wolves on Saturday.

Two regulation three-point wins on the road trip would vault Central York over the Burlington Barracudas into the sixth seed for the OWHL playoffs.

By Jim Stewart