

Panthers coast into Christmas Break with emphatic victories over Toronto and Windsor

The U22 Central York Panthers skated into the Christmas Break on a high note with a pair of impressive victories.

On Sunday afternoon at SARC, the Junior Panthers fired four goals over a nine-minute span in the first period and coasted to a 5-1 win over the Windsor Southwest Wildcats.

At the Vaughan Sports Village on Saturday night, Annabella Van Berkel's three-goal performance paced the fourth-place Panthers to a 5-2 win over the Toronto Aeros.

Van Berkel was pleased with the team's effort in Vaughan and at home.

?It's been a six-point weekend for us. We were coming off some losses so we stepped it up this weekend. Everybody played their roles and nobody tried to do too much. That was a big part of our success today and yesterday.?

At SARC on Sunday, the red-clad Panthers got off to another strong start in the first period. Van Berkel credited her club's productive first period as the key to victory over Windsor: ?We can't have slow starts. We played it simple today and made the right plays early in the game. We didn't wait too long to take the game to them. We were making the first pass tape-to-tape to create scoring chances.?

The Panthers cashed in on those scoring chances to which Van Berkel referred. Central York defender Mackenzie Cotey skated over the Wildcats blue line and fired the puck from between the circles ? beating Windsor goaltender Shannon Henshaw high blocker side. Cotey's unassisted marker gave the Panthers a 1-0 lead before four minutes had elapsed.

Four minutes later, Cotey's crisp forwarding pass found Van Berkel's tape and the Panthers' leading scorer exploited the open ice on the power play. She cut into the Wildcats zone, and sniped a shot from above the left faceoff circle that flew over Henshaw's shoulder glove side to extend Central York's lead to 2-0.

The veteran Panther described her 28th of the season which turned out to be the game-winner.

?I saw that I had some space when I was looking for my scoring options. It was a good goal because it created momentum for us.?

The Panthers made it 3-0 less than two minutes later when Abby Pak finished off a passing play from Elizabeth Shapira and Van Berkel. Pak bulged the twine with a laser she fired between the circles that beat Henshaw cleanly. Central York's third goal in six minutes compelled the Windsor coaching staff to use their timeout to steady the shellshocked Wildcats.

Ninety seconds after the timeout, ?The Red Wave? was not impeded by the break. Cotey's shot from the blue line was deflected by Elizabeth Janovski on to Anastasia Trifon's tape whose shot clanged off the crossbar ricocheted off Henshaw's back and dropped across the goal line. The combination of puck luck and diligence provided the Panthers with a 4-0 lead and forced Henshaw from the game.

The Windsor starter was replaced by Isla Wilson whose sparkling play for the balance of the period and during the middle frame kept the contest from becoming a laugh.

Van Berkel commented on Wilson's play, especially in the second period when she made 30 saves:

?She's an 18U from Whitby. We hadn't seen her before. I think we were rushing our shots in the second period, but she played a good game.?

Wilson's performance between the pipes re-instilled her teammates' confidence. On an ensuing two-on-one generated by the Wildcats, Kiley Couture finished a nice setup from Emma Holm and slid the puck past Panthers' netminder Claire Hicks with 27 seconds left to narrow the visitors' deficit to 4-1 heading into the first intermission.

The only puck to elude Wilson during the middle frame was fired by Janovski in the goalmouth who converted Ashley Minor's skillful centering pass with 50.7 seconds left before second intermission.

Janovski's shot was the 30th faced by Wilson.

On Saturday evening versus the Aeros, the script was remarkably similar. The Panthers took control of the game with a three-goal outburst in the first period. Three minutes into the opening frame, Van Berkel returned triumphantly from the injured list and made it 1-0 for the visitors when she converted Ella Frasca's feed.

Central York's leading points-getter added an unassisted goal at 10:56 to put the Panthers up 2-0.

Six minutes later, Minor completed a passing play from Briar Deckers and Lily Paisley to give the hard-pressing visitors a three-goal lead.

With 27 seconds left in the opening period, Aeros' forward Dalyn Fairey narrowed Toronto's deficit to 3-1.

However, Central York blueliner Cotey, set up by defensive partner Rachel Talesnik, restored the Panthers' three-goal lead at 14:22 of the second period to stifle any prospective rally by the home side.

Van Berkel completed her hat trick with assists earned by Pak and Minor with 9:43 left in third period. Her 27th of the season moved her into second place in U22 Elite Division goal-scoring and gave the Panthers a commanding 5-1 lead.

Remarkably, Van Berkel has already surpassed her breakout 2024-25 season point totals when she garnered 20 goals and 6 assists in 46 games. This season, 'Big Goal' Van Berkel has accrued 35 points in 28 games good enough for 8th place in league's scoring.

With the pair of victories to close out the 2025 portion of their regular season schedule, the Panthers improved their hold on fourth place in the 25-team league with a sterling 21-6-1-2 record. When asked what the Panthers' New Year's Resolution would be, Van Berkel contemplated the question and noted, 'We need to be ready to go in the New Year. We need the points to get ahead in the standings. Getting off to good starts in all our games is something we need to do.'

By Jim Stewart