

Panthers look to bounce back from last season's heartbreaker



By Jake Courtepatte

Last March, the Intermediate Aurora Panthers looked poised to return to the second round of the Provincial Women's Hockey League playoffs for the first time since 2012.

Having barely squeaked into the post-season in sixteenth place, the Panthers were up two games to one on the powerhouse Toronto Aeros in PWHL preliminaries, before collapsing defensively to lose the series in five games.

‘It definitely hurt,’ said team captain Brittany Kucera. ‘We showed that we could compete with them and win, we could have easily been the ones moving on.’

They will have to move on from last year's upset as they prepare for the 2015-16 season, set in motion by a pair of pre-season games this weekend against Leaside and Barrie.

But when this year's incarnation of the Panthers squad steps onto the ice for the first game, there will be a number of fresh faces. Last season's older, more mature roster has been filled with names called up from the midget level, with Kucera the only remaining 1997-born player on the team.

Two of last season's top-three scorers on the team, Tara Morning and Becca Chilvers, have graduated from the team and will be suiting up this year for the Tigers of Dalhousie University.

Both Melissa Black and Taylor Lemmon, instrumental in Aurora's shutdown defence late last season, are moving on from the Panthers. Black has joined the Union College hockey team in New York, competing in D1, the highest level of NCAA-sanctioned sports.

Backstopping the Panthers this season will be Frances Tenney and Jenna Alessandrini, both formerly of the Panthers Midget AA team.

‘They're both strong goaltenders,’ said head coach Mike Reier. ‘They're both strong positionally. We've got a lot of faith in them.’

Reier returns as bench boss for his third season, while the Panthers organization has brought in a new goaltender development coach, Panther alumnus Nicole Kesteris. Kesteris has spent the last four years as an all-star in the CIS, earning a 51-28 record while backstopping the University of Toronto Varsity Blues.

She also earned the title of 2014 U of T Athlete of the Year.

?There's no place I'd rather be but Aurora, because that's where it all began,? said Kesteris.

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