

Rangers ruin another Tigers? School Day Game with dramatic last-minute goal in 2-1 upset win

The North York Rangers are becoming perennial party poopers.

For the second consecutive season, the last-place Rangers rolled into the ACC for a high noon puck drop and defeated the Aurora Tigers much to the disappointment of the annual School Day Game attendees.

Despite a vocal contingent of fans from Devins Drive Elementary School chanting "Let's go Tigers, Let's Go," Aurora's Junior A squad surrendered the game-winning goal with 36.6 seconds left in the contest and fell 2-1 to the twelfth-place Rangers on Tuesday afternoon.

Rangers' Captain Cian Noble rifled a wrist shot from the right faceoff dot that beat Tigers' goaltender Erik Powers high stick side to secure the victory for the visitors.

Aurora outshot North York 48-19, but it was the opportunistic Rangers that squeezed out the road win.

Noble's dramatic game-winner, his first goal of the season, sent the ninety-five kids back to Devins Drive a wee bit downtrodden based on the youngsters' body language I witnessed as they walked single file on the sidewalk along Aurora Heights Drive. Bless the intrepid Devins Drive supervisors for encouraging the physical fitness of their 95 young charges and for reducing their carbon footprint by walking to and from the game rather than riding in an exhaust-belching bus. Complimentary coffees for the supervising teachers would have been a nice touch at the ACC. Perhaps next year.

Speaking of hospitality, the concession stand window at the ACC was rolled up with 10:25 left in the second period and it coincided with an uptick in action in a scoreless hockey game. With the aroma of popcorn wafting through half the venerable arena, the teams' misfiring offences were roused from their late-November slumber.

After the Tigers narrowly missed a go-ahead goal by rapping one off the goal post in a goalmouth scramble at 3:19, the Rangers broke a scoreless tie. On a delayed penalty to the Tigers and with the extra Rangers' attacker in the offensive zone, North York's Cain Tucker banked the puck off the left boards and fed his carom to Peter Smith between the circles who one-timed the centering pass past Powers at 2:08. It was Tucker's team-leading 16th assist of the season.

Fifty seconds later, the tenacious Tigers tied the game when Eric Li beat Rangers' netminder Dylan Dewachter with a snapshot that bulged the twine and gave the attentive Devins Drive contingent something to cheer about.

Li's first OJHL goal was assisted by Domenic Battaglia and Jamie Buscarini.

Similar to last year's School Day Game, the Tigers were stymied by an acrobatic North York Ranger goaltender. Dewachter, who stopped 47 of the 48 shots he faced, was selected as the First Star of the Game by OJHL Staff and withstood a desperate flurry of shots in the last thirty seconds as Aurora pressed with their net empty and an extra Tiger stalking the offensive zone.

Unlike last year's high-scoring, entertaining School Day Game where 12 goals were tallied and 800 young fans graced the old rink with their vocal presence, the 2024 version of the annual event was a nod to the prevailing spirit of the 2020's: Minimalism.

Minimal goals scored.

Minimal fans in attendance?thank goodness for those 95 kids and their teachers from Devins Drive.

Minimal exposure to concession goodies--thank goodness a \$5 bag of tasty popcorn could be procured during second intermission as

a kind of salty solace amid a season of disappointment.

It must be acknowledged that the young Tigers put forth a maximum on-ice effort during their Tuesday matinee, but the disappointing loss to the Rangers (4-24-1-0) dropped the struggling home side ten points out of a playoff spot.

It's another one of those 'darkest before the dawn' moments for Aurora's Junior A Hockey team with our dimly-lit days in late-Fall serving as meteorological metaphors for a kind of darkness descending on another lost OJHL season.

The Tigers have lost 11 games in a row and close out their November schedule with a visit to SG Nesbitt Memorial Arena on Saturday afternoon to take on the Haliburton County Huskies (18-8-0-0).

Haliburton's .692 winning percentage ranks fifth in the twenty-four team OJHL. The Huskies lead the season series with the Tigers 2-0, based on a 5-2 home ice win in September and a 4-1 win at the ACC in October. Former Tiger Carson Littlejohn, acquired by Aurora in a mid-season blockbuster trade with the Toronto Junior Canadiens in 2023-24, leads all Haliburton County defensemen in scoring with 4 goals and 18 assists.

The Tigers' next home game is Tuesday, December 1 when they host the high-flying Canadiens (18-6-0-2). Puck drop will be 12 noon at the ACC.

By Jim Stewart