

Rookie-laden Tigers? roster rolls to 5-3 win over the Pickering Panthers

Rookie center Jobey Pearson's three-point performance ? and key goals by first year defensemen Carson Littlejohns, Jacob Carroll, and Liam Longo ? paced the Aurora Tigers to a 5-3 win over the Pickering Panthers at the ACC on Friday night.

Remarkably, it was the Tigers' first home game of 2024 after a grueling six-city road trip and the young team opened it efficiently by scoring on its first power play opportunity. 35 seconds into Pickering forward's Joseph Colangelo's two-minute hooking penalty and 10-minute misconduct for abuse of officials, Littlejohn's snap shot from the left point flew through the Pickering PK unit and goaltender Glen McInnes to give the Tigers a 1-0 lead.

The sturdy, smooth-skating defenseman's third of the season?set up by Pearson and Josh Frenette ?was a crucial goal at 9:35. According to Littlejohn, ?It created momentum for us. We needed a big win tonight on home ice and getting the lead was important.?

Littlejohn expressed relief that the team was back in its home rink after a month away from the ACC following the completion of a challenging 1-5 road trip.

?It's great to be back. I love it. It helped us a lot tonight being back here.?

On a night when the young Tigers' defense corps provided three of its team's five goals with accurate shots from the point, Littlejohn explained the connection between practice and game performance.

?Thursday night is D practice and we work on the skills we need to defend. We also worked on creating scoring opportunities from the blue line. Our D was able to score three tonight. We're young and it's great to win together.?

73 seconds after Littlejohn had given his team the lead, former Tiger Zennon Edwards?who tallied 23 points for the 2022-23 Aurora squad?tied the game when he rifled a puck past Yianni Karkoulas.

Edwards scored his ninth of the season to give the Panthers a 2-1 lead at 2:53 of the second period which featured free-flowing skating, excellent defensive stick work by both teams, and fine goaltending by Karkoulas and McInnes.

After Edwards narrowly missed his hat trick by ringing one off the crossbar, Tigers' defenseman Jacob Carroll tallied his second goal of the campaign and evened the score. Newly-appointed Assistant Captain Asher Goduco?who hails from Lake Forest, Illinois?assisted on Carroll's tying goal at 14:46 of the middle frame and the divisional rivals skated into the second intermission deadlocked 2-2.

Six minutes into the third period, tenacious Tigers Captain Decaluwe fired a puck that McInnes stopped but could not corral. Aurora's leading scorer Frank Castiglione banged in the rebound to restore the home team's one-goal lead. Decaluwe and Adam Matar earned the assists on Castiglione's eleventh of the season.

With the lead restored, the bruising Tiger trio of Matar, Kyle Baston, and Tyler Oletic continued hitting any black-jerseyed Panther on the ice and Aurora's heavy game seemed to sap some of the life out of the visitors.

However, Darren Wilson's unassisted goal pulled Pickering into a 3-3 tie at 7:49 on a second chance opportunity after Karkoulas had made a brilliant athletic save on the speedy Panther forward.

Rather than folding under the pressure of surrendering a third period lead, the rookie-laden Tigers lineup demonstrated resilience after Wilson's tying goal.

Aurora's game-winning goal came courtesy of the young defense corps?its third goal of the game ?when Liam Longo lit the lamp.

The mobile rookie defender crept in from the blue line and banged in a rebound inside the left circle.

Longo's power play goal at 10:40 was assisted by Pearson and Frenette?a confluence of first-year players whose games flowed together nicely.

Adam Matar, the Tigers' hard-hitting forward, provided the Tigers with an insurance goal at 15:10 when he finished a perfect pass from Pearson.

The BC-born playmaker's third assist of the game and twelfth of the season expanded the Tigers' lead to 5-3 and allowed the faithful ACC fans to exhale in existential relief.

Although Matar drew an interference penalty with 3:59 left in the game, the Tigers' PK unit of Connor Russo, Decaluwe, Jack Rispin, and Christian Holden held the fort to repel the Panthers.

Russo's big blocked shot and his timely takeaway, along with the steely determination of rookie netminder Karkoulas, preserved the Tigers' margin of victory.

Karkoulas earned the W by turning aside 22 of the 25 shots, and his athleticism was on full display throughout the evening.

By Jim Stewart