

Russo rescues Tigers with big breakaway goal to sink the Caledon Admirals

The Aurora Tigers closed their regular season on a winning note with a 4-2 home victory over the Caledon Admirals in OJHL play on Monday night.

Tigers forward Connor Russo scored the game-winning goal on an electrifying breakaway. Russo rifled a snapshot between the pads of Admirals' netminder Nicholas Van Kaufmann with 3:21 left in the third period and created a wave of relief through the ACC.

The swift-skating Tiger credited his GWG to a "great tape-to-tape pass from [Joseph] Martino and finally getting a lucky bounce. I saw the five-hole open up and fired it through."

The hard-working and antagonistic Aurora forward expressed a sense of accomplishment with the home ice victory.

"It was nice to be rewarded with a win. Locking up seventh for the playoffs was important for seeding."

Tigers' Captain Lucas Stanojevic, who scored his 33rd goal of the season into an empty net with 42 seconds left to provide the margin of victory, spoke about the key to beating Caledon.

"We controlled the pace and stuck to doing the little things. It was a big game coming in tonight and it was great to get the seventh spot for the playoffs."

In addition to his impressive 60-point season, Stanojevic reflected on playing in his 100th OJHL game.

"It's pretty cool and exciting to reach these milestones. I've had great line-mates all season. I've tried to take care of myself and I've set high expectations for myself to be a better offensive producer. Transitioning last year from AA and playing against bigger players was challenging, but I was able to stick with it and had a good second year in the league."

The Tigers' leader on and off the ice said he was pleased with his team taking three of the four points in Aurora's final two games of the regular season.

"These last few games - a win tonight against Caledon and taking a point against Milton on Saturday - are giving the team confidence. Going into a big playoff series against either Georgetown or Burlington, we can't be scared. We have to set the tone and play physically. We'll need to step up our physicality."

Stanojevic's Tigers set the tone and played physically against Caledon in the first period of play. They shot early and often on Admirals' goaltender Van Kaufmann. The home team's diligent forechecking was rewarded at 7:44 when Matteo Iacovelli tipped in Alex Case's wrist shot from the point to put the Tigers ahead 1-0. Another Case blast from the blue line was tipped into the back of the Admirals' cage with less than two minutes remaining in the period, but the goal was nullified due to a high stick.

The Tigers came out hitting to start the second period with all lines sustaining pressure and generating numerous icings by Caledon. Any lapses in pressure were salvaged by the steady goaltending of Aurora's Glen Crandall who made a series of big saves with his team clinging to a 1-0 lead. Crandall finished the game with .900 save percentage, turning back 18 of the 20 Admiral shots.

The Tigers took a 2-0 lead in the middle frame when Noah DeSantis made a nice move at the right point to elude an Admiral and fired a puck from the top of the circle. DeSantis's shot generated a juicy rebound for Jace Lavallee to bang past Van Kaufmann. Assists went to Russo and Stefan Forgione on Lavallee's 10th of the season.

The game turned, however, due to an untimely roughing penalty by Iacovelli with 1:59 left in the period. Iacovelli's scuffle after the whistle provided the Admirals with a power play which they converted when Dawson Hettiarachchi tipped in a deflection between

Crandall's pads. Admirals' top scorer Daniil Kononov drew his 41st assist of the season on the power play goal with the other assist going to Dawson Doner with forty seconds remaining in the middle frame.

Midway through the third period and with the momentum shifting to the visitors, the Admirals tied the game 2-2 when Caledon callup Nathan Catalano snapped a shot past Crandall on assists from Hettiarachchi and Tanner Greenwood. But it was Russo's electrifying breakaway goal at 3:21 on Noah DeSantis's second assist of the game and Martino's finesse feed that put Aurora on top to stay. With 1:44 to play and the Tigers clinging to their one-goal lead, Caledon Head Coach Chris Taylor called a timeout with a faceoff in the Aurora zone. He pulled Van Kaufmann for the extra attacker and the Admirals pressed to tie the game. However, Carter Real and Ryan Evenhuis gained the neutral zone with the Admirals' net empty and Stanojevic iced the game with 41.6 seconds left.

Tigers' Head Coach Greg Johnston was satisfied with his team's three consecutive solid games [versus Burlington, Milton, and Caledon] but he was very happy with their effort against Milton.

The Tigers dug down versus the Milton Menace on Saturday night and earned a point in a 2-2 double-overtime tie. Coach Johnston felt that it's always nice to get a win heading into the playoffs and Russo scored a big goal tonight and picked a spot, but the Tigers' bench boss liked best his team's effort on Saturday night versus the Menace.

Johnston's Tigers established a 1-0 lead on Stanojevic's 32nd goal of the season on assists from Carter Real and Ryan Evenhuis at 16:37 of the first period. The home team fell behind 2-1 in the middle frame on Menace goals by Conor Driscoll at 2:51 and Jared Coccimiglio at 5:19 on a Milton power play.

The Menace took their one-goal advantage into the third period, but Zennon Edwards tied the game for the Tigers on Evenhuis's second assist of the game to force overtime. Two periods of overtime did not create a winner so both teams skated away with a crucial pre-playoff point for their concerted efforts on Saturday night at the ACC. Tigers' Goaltender Glen Crandall stopped 24 of 26 menacing shots he faced to earn the tie for his team.

Aurora will face either Georgetown or Burlington in the first round of the OJHL playoffs. Playoff dates will be announced formally, but the Tigers' first home playoff game will be Sunday, March 12.

Captain Lucas Stenojevic finished the season with 33 goals and 27 assists for 60 points in 54 games.

Noah's DeSantis's two assists versus Caledon bumped his assist total to 22 for the season.

The Tigers (18-27-3-5) finished their regular season with 46 points and sewed up seventh place in the Northwest Conference with the win over Caledon.

The Admirals dropped to 8-38-1-4 with the loss to the Tigers and will miss the OJHL playoffs.

By Jim Stewart