

Simon Howard tallies two goals, but Tigers' third period home ice rally falls short in 5-3 loss to Wellington Dukes

The Aurora Junior Tigers conducted a lightning-fast comeback effort in their final 2024-25 home game on Thursday afternoon at the ACC.

Trailing 3-1 late in the third period, hard-working Tigers' Assistant Captain Cayden Smith tipped the puck past Dukes' netminder Jacob Brown for his 17th of the season at 16:37 to narrow the home side's deficit.

Fourteen seconds later, Simon Howard scored his second goal of the game when he buried a snap shot past Brown high glove side to complete a stirring breakaway set up by Jack Rispin's perfect neutral zone pass. The Tigers' leading scorer described his 19th of the season that made it 3-3 and erased Wellington's lead: "I got a nice pass up from Rispin. I was going to go backhand on the breakaway, but I saw some space and shot it top corner."

After Howard's tying goal, the home side had all the momentum and the Tigers appeared to be rewriting Thursday's narrative. However, the fifth-place Dukes spoiled the storybook ending for the eleventh-place Tigers when Ryan Schaap fired his 32nd of the season over Aurora's sprawled goaltender Christopher Thompson.

Riley Noble's wrist shot from the left point flew into the Tigers' empty net with 31.3 seconds left to provide the Dukes with their two-goal margin of victory.

The narrow 5-3 home-ice loss on Thursday, combined with a 7-3 loss to the Dukes in Prince Edward County on Friday and a 4-2 loss to the Junior Sabres on Sunday, dropped the Tigers' final record to 11-40-1-4.

Aurora's Junior A hockey squad finished second-last in the 12-team OJHL East—seventy points behind the first-place powerhouse Trenton Golden Hawks (47-6-2-1).

Sadly, the local hockey side was eliminated from the OJHL playoffs early in January for a second consecutive season so Thursday's matinee on Election Day served as an opportunity to spoil the Dukes' push for the fourth seed in the upcoming postseason tournament.

Despite the Tigers' rough season, there was ambience in the venerable arena as the aroma of popcorn wafted through the corridors and welcomed spectators to the rescheduled, snowed-out game from January 15.

The black-clad Dukes opened the scoring midway through the first period when Sacha Trudel toe-dragged the puck past two defenders and slid a pass to Zander Latreille who one-timed it past Thompson.

The heroic Tigers' goaltender, who was blitzed all season with vulcanized rubber, fended off a particularly-dominant Wellington power play with less than five minutes left in the first period.

In all, the rangy Tigers' netminder stopped 17 of 18 shots in the opening frame to keep Aurora in the contest.

Thompson's 44-save performance versus the Dukes earned him Third Star of the Game honors.

The Tigers pulled even with 3:42 left in the period when hard work in the house by Simon Howard allowed him to corral a loose puck in the slot and snap the puck past Brown. The rookie forward described his 18th of the season: "Mikro shot the puck in and Jack did a nice job keeping the puck in the zone."

"Beganovic and I battled together out front to get the rebound off Jack's shot and I was able to tie it up."

The Dukes restored their one-goal margin at 12:59 of the second period when penalty killer Ben Vreugdenhil won a neutral zone puck chase with two Tigers, created space, deked Thompson, and slipped the puck inside the left goal post.

After Tigers' forward Tristan Aben was banished from the game for checking from behind, Wellington scored eight seconds into the ensuing power play when Ryan Schaap pushed the puck past Thompson in a goal mouth scramble.

It was Schaap's 31st of the season and put the Dukes up 3-1 prior to the spirited rally by the Tigers.

On Friday night in Prince Edward County, the Dukes opened up an early 4-0 cushion before Tigers' rookie defenseman Luke Howard tallied his sixth of the season with 34 seconds left in the first period.

Wellington added three consecutive goals to take a 7-1 lead three minutes into the third period.

Matthew Johnson's short-handed goal at 5:08 pulled the Tigers to within five and Aurora defenseman Jack Rispin scored his fifth of the season with 3:20 left to close the scoring. Simon Howard earned his 28th assist of the season while Cayden Smith tallied his 22nd helper. With the home ice victory, Wellington finished with a 33-19-0-4 record in the OJHL East.

On Sunday afternoon in Buffalo, the Junior Sabres jumped out to a 3-0 lead midway through the second period before Smith scored his 18th with 2:26 left in the middle frame. Beganovic scored the Tigers' final goal of the game one minute into the third period with helpers from the Howard brothers but Buffalo's Joshua Przytak fired an empty netter with 12 seconds left in the game to stifle Aurora's closing extra-man push.

It was somehow fitting that Simon Howard and Luke Howard earned the assists on the Tigers' final goal of the 2024-25 campaign. Simon Howard, who earned his 29th assist of the season on Beganovic's marker, described how much he enjoyed playing his first Junior A season with his younger brother: "It's been awesome and memorable.

"We're best friends. We've had some great chemistry on the ice this year and scored some goals together."

The 6'3", 190-pound power forward expressed his satisfaction that although the season was difficult at times, there were personal and team highlights. In addition to playing hockey with his high-scoring defenseman brother, Simon Howard felt, "I improved personally and I really lit the lamp after the Christmas Break. Team-wise, we kept getting a little better all season, we won a tournament in Niagara Falls, and it was important to build team chemistry. We now have a good core of players and we need to pick up some older players to be more competitive. We need to have a good summer camp to set up for a better season in 2025-26."

By Jim Stewart