

Stouffville Spirit spoil the Tigers? opening night by edging Aurora 4-3 in OJHL Action



It's been ten years since the Aurora Tigers hung a banner at the ACC.

In 2013-14, the Town's Junior A Hockey team earned an OJHL North-East Conference pennant. Judging by the number of bold, roster-altering off-season roster moves, the 2023-24 Tigers want to get back to those ethereal days of dominating divisions, enjoying deep runs in the playoffs, and winning championships as they did in 2004 and 2007.

The Tigers are so confident that this year's core roster is filled with promise that they have imported three players from British Columbia?Bode Pearson, Jobey Pearson, and Carson Brown?as well as Max Cervjakovs from Latvia and Philip Goduco from Illinois to significantly alter and augment the team.

Even more dramatically, ten days before the OJHL season began, Tigers management jettisoned their returning captain and leading scorer Luca Stanojevic to the Toronto Junior Canadiens for future considerations.

Stanojevic's captaincy was transferred to OJHL veteran Ethan Lindsay?another of the team's prized off-season acquisitions. Lindsay brings with him championship pedigree after winning an OJHL title with the 2021-22 Pickering Panthers and he took Friday's ceremonial faceoff on behalf of the Tigers to signal the changing of the guard.

A transformed Tigers team stepped on to the ice on Friday night in search of a season-opening victory, but the visiting Stouffville Spirit ruined the hockey party at the ACC which included a spot-lit, ceremonial, red carpet puck-drop by many local dignitaries?among them Mayor Tom Mrakas and Team Governor Jim Thomson, whose Aurora Sports Hall of Fame induction in November was also being recognized by the hockey club.

The Spirit, after splitting a pair of 7-3 exhibition decisions with the Tigers last week, edged the home side 4-3 on Friday to kick off the 2023-24 season.

Both teams and the 250 fans assembled endured a 52-minute game delay as the ACC crew struggled mightily to replace a sheet of plexiglass that was shattered by an errant puck during the pre-game skate.

The final installation of a custom-cut pane of glass was met with a rousing ovation by those gathered for the big game.

The Tigers came out hitting from the opening faceoff. Thirty seconds into the game, their pugnacious, newly-minted Captain had a golden opportunity to endear himself to the ACC faithful when he was gifted with a fortuitous bounce in the slot with an open net, but Lindsay whiffed on the shot attempt.

The Spirit turned that missed opportunity into a period-long onslaught against the Tigers.

Most of the celebratory air evaporated from the building when the swift-skating Spirit scored six minutes into the game.

Peter Kioussis, with assists from Nathan Twohey and Odaro Ewere, slipped the puck past Aurora goaltender Will Gounas to stake the Spirit to a 1-0 lead.

However, the Tigers revealed their early-season resilience when BC import forward Carson Brown scored the team's first goal of 2023-24.

Brown's power play marker just past the midway point of the period tied the game when he deftly tipped the puck in the slot past Spirit goaltender Matteo Gennaro.

In response, the Spirit presented its own prowess with the man advantage.

Stouffville's power play was truly impressive in the opening frame as the Spirit converted both of their extra man opportunities with fearful symmetry? both power play goals were scored within six seconds and both were scored by Zack Corte.

The Spirit forward's offensive skills were on full display during both of his power play goals. Corte's snap shot restored Stouffville's one-goal lead ninety seconds after the Tigers' tying goal and his laser wrist shot from the point increased the visitors' lead to 3-1 going into the second period.

The Spirit's specialty teams sparkled again less than four minutes into the middle frame when their penalty killers found the scoresheet.

Stouffville's Captain Odaro Ewere got behind both Tigers' point men on an Aurora power play and, on a clear-cut breakaway, he rolled a changeup off his stick that handcuffed Goumas and gave the visitors a 4-1 lead.

Three acrobatic mid-period saves by Goumas kept the Tigers close and Aurora responded offensively. Speedy Assistant Captain Ryan Evenhuis burst over the blue line and fired a wrist shot past Gennaro to narrow the Spirit's lead to 4-2. Evenhuis's goal gave the home team a lift and they created numerous chances as the second frame drew to a close.

The Tigers dominated play in the third period as they out-chanced and out-skated their guests. Aurora's diligence was rewarded at 12.49 when rangy center Kyle Baston scored the prettiest goal of the evening.

Baston buried a perfect pass top shelf to pull the Tigers to within one and caught the attention of Head Coach Greg Johnston.

It was a goal scorer's goal created by a great pass and great forechecking.

Coach Johnston also credited his goaltender's work in the second and third period for keeping the Tigers in the game: Will made some big saves tonight, especially in the third period. His big stops gave us a chance and allowed us to battle through the final period.

Johnston was also pleased with this team's effort in the third period: It's Game One, but we didn't start well enough in the first period. However, the third period was the real story tonight for us. We gave ourselves a chance to salvage a point and our guys carried the play in the final twenty minutes. Hopefully, we'll take that momentum into Stouffville on Saturday night.

History repeated itself when 2023-24 Tigers' Captain Lucas Stanojevic was traded to the Toronto Junior Canadiens two weeks ago. Stanojevic's a classy presence on and off the ice? led the Tigers in scoring last season with 33 goals and 27 assists in 54 games.

He was promoted to Captain after Tigers' management traded Connor Van Weelie, the Captain of the 2022-23 Tigers, to the Canadiens to shift the Aurora roster one month into the season.

It's the second consecutive season that the Aurora Tigers have traded their Captain to ?JRC? in an early-season transaction. The Toronto Junior Canadiens are in the Tigers' division this season in the revamped OJHL.

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