

Team Sweden edges Team Switzerland 1-0 in their IIHF ?home game? at the ACC



The Town of Aurora has been ?twinned? with the Town of Leksand, Sweden since 1976. The similarities between the twin towns include a deep sense of community and a love of sports, including hockey.

Feeling ?right at home? at the Aurora Community Centre on Sunday afternoon, Team Sweden defeated Team Switzerland 1-0 in an IIHF exhibition game that entertained over 1,000 spectators from start to finish.

The teams used the ?friendly? to prepare for the 2023 IIHF Women's World Championships being held in Brampton from April 5-16. With three days to go before the World Championships, Team Sweden's Head Coach Ulf Lundgren was happy with his team's effort and delineated the keys to victory.

?We functioned as one for most of the game. We were able to create stops when needed and played well in the second and third periods. We used the whole offensive zone.?

The amiable and accommodating bench boss brightened when asked if it felt like a home game for Team Sweden.

?It did. I really enjoyed the environment. The Town and the Panthers have done so much for us and we want to thank them for their support.?

After the ceremonial puck drop by Mayor Tom Mrakas, accompanied by Central York Panthers representatives Jenna Crawsha, Shayla Gorman, and Lauren Waddall, it was clear that most Aurorans in attendance were backing the ?home? team in yellow.

Most of the fans gathered at the ACC broke into ?Let's Go Sweden? chants, followed by the cacophonous yet choral thuds of Thunderstix emblazoned with ?Panther Pride?.

The Swedes?resplendent in their classic ?Tre Kronor? yellow and blue jerseys ? and the Swiss, looking familiar in their Team Canada-like red, black, and white uniforms, engaged in an entertaining opening period of missed chances and timely saves by the starting goaltenders: Team Sweden's Emma Soderberg of the University of Minnesota and Team Switzerland's Andrea Brandlj.

Brandlj, an NCAA netminder for Boston University, made three particularly acrobatic saves to thwart the fast-skating Swedes, most notably a butterfly stop on a 2 on 1 rush at 3:09 to keep the score 0-0. At even strength, the Swedes had the edge in play, but they also drew numerous penalties during the opening frame and into the early part of the second period to provide the Swiss with ample

power play opportunities.

Coach Lundgren's acknowledged the ?really good play? of his penalty-killing unit.

?We blocked shots and played our system.?

An appreciative crowd, many of them sporting Central York Panthers jersey, cheered both teams off the ice after an entertaining opening period of end-to-end hockey.

The Swiss opened the second period with feisty forechecking and controlled the pace of play for five minutes. Swiss captain Lara Stalder kept her offence buzzing and only a big save by Soderberg on a deft deflection kept the game scoreless.

It seemed that Sweden struck first on a power play goal at 12.17, but it was disallowed due to goalie interference.

Midway through the game, Team Sweden switched goalies as Sara Grahn of Swedish club team Lulea HF took over from Soderson between the pipes. Coach Lundgren's timely substitution seemed to spur the Swedes. Accordingly, the pro-Sweden ACC crowd erupted when Tre Kronor forward Gilda Svensson fired a wrist shot from between the circles to beat Brandlj. The unassisted and skillful individual effort by Svensson gave Team Sweden a 1-0 lead that would not be relinquished.

Coach Lundberg weighed in on Svensson's game-winning goal, ?Hilda has the skills and the hockey IQ. Her goal showed her creativity and the coolness to work out situations. She shows us this each game.?

Although Brandlj was beaten by Svensson's marker at 9.24 of the middle frame, it was her stellar play in the Swiss net that kept the game as close as it was.

Point blank athletic saves at 1.41 on a deflection and at 0.46 in a goal mouth scramble kept Switzerland's deficit to one goal heading into the third period.

Brandlj maintained her acrobatic act to start the third period and bailed out her penalty killers by making three spectacular saves with the Swedish power play buzzing all around her.

With 2.35 remaining in the game and Team Sweden's Nathalie Lidman in the penalty box for hooking, Team Switzerland Head Coach Muller Colin called a timeout, pulled Brandlj from the net, and put out an extra attacker in a final push for the tying goal.

The Swiss just missed knotting the game in a goal mouth scramble in the final minute and narrowly missed finishing off a nice cross-ice saucer pass in the waning remaining seconds.

Team Sweden missed its own neutral zone empty net opportunities with Brandlj on the bench in favour of the extra attacker and held on to its one-goal victory.

The 1-0 thriller was especially entertaining for families who brought their children to see these top-flight international female athletes, including Shaun and Amy Dakin, whose three daughters Aria, Everly, and Madison attended the game along with grandparents Ken and Cheryl Wood.

Shaun Dakin was impressed by ?the great play on the ice. It was exciting hockey to watch.?

Cheryl Wood expressed gratitude to her daughter, Nicole, for securing the group of seven their IIHF tickets: ?We were lucky to get the tickets through our daughter and through the Town. What a great show of skill by both teams. I was surprised by how physical the game was, too.?

Sunday's game not only entertained extended families like the Dakin-Wood group, but it was another manifestation of Aurora's love of community, love of sport, and a wee bit of love for the twin city of Leksand by ardently supporting the top-flight athletes in yellow and blue.

By Jim Stewart