

Tigers draw Wellington Dukes in OJHL first round series



By Jake Courtepatte

The smoke has cleared after a chaotic final few weeks of the Ontario Junior Hockey League regular season, and from it comes a matchup last seen in the 2007 OPJHL championship.

The Aurora Tigers will face the Wellington Dukes in the Northeast Conference quarterfinals, with postseason action set to kick off across the League this weekend. Sixteen teams will vie for the opportunity to represent Ontario on the national stage for the RBC Cup.

Clinching a berth in the postseason last week, the Tigers entered the final week of the regular season with the possibility of moving as high as second, by surpassing the North division-leading Markham Royals, and as low as sixth. A handful of points picked up by higher-seeded teams meant the Tigers needed a win Friday night on the road against the Oakville Blades to stand any chance of improving their playoff stock.

Down 3 ? 0 early in the third, captain Daniel Mantenuto broke the goose egg and later scored his second with goaltender Josh Boyko pulled early to make it 3 ? 2. With the net still empty, it was a frustrating finish for the Tigers when Alex Formenton batted in a bouncing puck just after the final buzzer.

The loss, coupled with a win by the Dukes, solidified the fifth-place finish for the Tigers heading into the final Saturday of play. Over 400 fans came out for a final glimpse of the Aurora team that would skate in the OJHL playoffs, as they hosted the league-leading Trenton Golden Hawks, who wrapped up the regular season title that the Tigers held one year ago.

Fittingly enough, however, it was the Tigers that had their number all season: two of their five regular season losses had come against Aurora.

Make it three of six, as Boyko readied himself for the postseason by stopping all 30 shots he faced in a 3 ? 0 win. Goals went to Drake Board, Formenton, and Nolan Dunn with an empty-netter.

?I think it gives us a boost of confidence heading into playoffs,? said Boyko. ?It just shows that we can handle ourselves with any team in this league.?

Home ice advantage goes to the higher-seeded Dukes, with Game One set for Friday at 7.30 p.m. at the Wellington Community Centre. Game Two returns to the Aurora Community Centre Sunday at 7:30 p.m., alternating rinks for the remainder of the best-of-seven series.

Those two extra points that earned the Dukes four games in their own rink could certainly play a factor in the series: both teams

finished with an impressive home record but mediocre road one, with the Tigers going 17-5-0-5 at the ACC but only 11-12-1-3 away from it.

The Tigers defeated the Dukes in five games in the 2006-07 championship to win the Buckland Cup, the first step on their way to winning the RBC Cup that season.

Wellington swept the season series this year, 4 ? 0.

?It'll be a tough go, but everyone has been really on their game lately and we're coming together well,? said Boyko, a rookie goalie thrust into the spotlight after an injury to starter Alex Fotinos. ?This is obviously the time of the year where everyone has to bring their best every night, and I think that's something we can do.?

Elsewhere in the conference, the Newmarket Hurricanes squeaked into the final playoff spot on the last day of regular season action to face the powerhouse Golden Hawks, the Royals face the seventh-seed Whitby Fury, and the third-seed Kingston Voyageurs are home to the sixth-seed Cobourg Cougars.

For stats, schedules, and more information, visit www.auroratigers.pointstreaksites.com.