

Tigers mugged 5-2 by Muskies in Lindsay, but Nei tallies two in North York to cue 3-2 comeback win over Rangers

The Aurora Tigers' playoff plans took a hard bodycheck on Friday night when the local Junior A squad lost 5-2 to the Muskies in Lindsay.

However, a glimmer of light reemerged on Sunday afternoon when Javian Nei's two-goal performance cued a third period comeback and the Tigers edged the Rangers 3-2 in North York.

Nei's three-goal weekend helped Aurora split a pair of road games and kept his team's faint post-season hopes alive.

Entering the contest in Lindsay, ninth-place Aurora trailed the eighth-place Muskies by nine points with two games in hand. If there was a must-win game for the Tigers in early-January, it was versus the Muskies.

The recently-acquired Nei gave the visitors early hope at the Lindsay Rec Complex when the former Toronto Patriot opened the scoring at 2:03 of the first period. Ethan Kindree diminished that vibe when he finished Kaden Koutroulides's feed on the power play at 10:53 to pull the home side even at 1-1.

The feisty Tigers responded with a power play goal of their own less than five minutes later when Anrijs Bundzenieks's unassisted marker restored Aurora's lead.

It was Bundzenieks's 11th of the season.

However, red-hot Koutroulides?who lit up the Rebellion with a two-goal, three-point performance on Sunday afternoon in the Muskies' 5-1 win in King?scored a short-handed goal fifteen seconds later to make it 2-2 heading into the first intermission.

Lindsay took over the game in the middle frame, outshooting Aurora 21-6. Koutroulides got the home side rolling when he earned the helper on Joaquin Gonzalez's go-ahead goal at 5:13 and Kindree scored his second of the game with 1:10 left in the middle frame to give the Muskies at 4-2 lead.

Koutroulides earned his third assist of the game by setting up Kai Williams's goal with five minutes remaining in the third period to provide the Muskies' margin of victory.

Prior to the game in Lindsay, the Tigers confirmed the acquisition of goaltender Kian Hodgins from the Navan Grads of the CCJHL. On January 3, the Tigers acquired another netminder, Noah Kraus, from the Muskies.

Kraus started Friday's game against his old team, made 19 saves in a busy middle frame, and turned aside 31 of the 36 shots he faced in the tough loss in Lindsay.

The arrival of Hodgins and Kraus coincided with the departure of star goaltender Matthew Humphries after parts of two seasons with the Tigers. Humphries signed a contract with the Oshawa Generals after being called up numerous times this season by the OHL club. Humphries started on Sunday in his new home rink versus the Barrie Colts.

With two new goaltenders on the roster and sitting eleven points out of a playoff spot, the Tigers (12-23-0-2) travelled to North York to take on the 12th-place Rangers (2-33-1-3) on Sunday.

Hodgins's 36-save performance and Nei's pair of goals in the third period impelled the 3-2 comeback victory by the Tigers over the struggling Rangers.

Aurora power forward Charlie Hotles's 8th of the season opened the scoring at 7:58 of the first period versus his old club?completing a passing play by Quinlan Clair and Jamie Buscarini.

The Tigers held their slim 1-0 lead for almost 28 minutes until Timur Naurzbaev beat Hodgins at 15:07 of the second period.

Luca Spano's early goal 1:24 into the third period gave the home side a 2-1 lead and spelled trouble for the Tigers. However, last Saturday's scoring hero versus Wellington, Johnathan Cirone, set up Nei two minutes later to tie the game. The productive Cirone has registered six points in seven games since being acquired in December from the Pickering Panthers.

Nei's game-winner?also assisted by Cirone?beat Rangers' netminder Reid Thomas at 5:37 and Aurora held on for their third win of the season over North York. It was Nei's 8th goal in 12 games for the Tigers since arriving in a blockbuster deal on December 2 with the first-place Patriots.

With the timely win at Herb Carnegie Arena, Aurora re-set their deficit to idle Lindsay to nine points for the final playoff spot in the OJHL East.

Hope springs eternal in Tiger Town.

By Jim Stewart