

Tigers split weekend homestand versus Brantford and Pickering

In an OJHL rematch of the Big Cats, the Pickering Panthers defeated the Aurora Tigers 5-2 at the ACC on Saturday night.

The chippy divisional contest was much closer than the final score would indicate as the Tigers skated hard with pre-playoff purpose versus the defending league champions and split their weekend home stand versus Brantford and Pickering.

Tigers' forward Connor Russo inserted on to a line with Stefan Forgione and Jace Lavalee due to an injury to Matthew Godwin ? was rewarded for his pesky forechecking when his wrist shot from the right circle found its way through a maze of skaters at a critical juncture in the final frame.

Russo's marker pulled the Tigers to within one with eleven minutes to go, reducing the Panthers' lead to 3-2. Russo complimented the forechecking of linemate Lavalee on the Tigers' key second goal.

?Jace created the opportunity for us with a strong forecheck. I just fired it at the net just before I was going to get hit.?

Although the Tigers would give up a power play goal and empty net goal much later in the period, Russo was pleased with his team's play in their back-to-back games at home.

?We were working hard in both games. It was a big weekend for us and we showed how resilient we are. We want to support each other in this final drive to the playoffs and picking up two points yesterday was good in our race with Stouffville for the seventh seed. Who knows? Any team can get hot in a seven-game playoff series.?

Russo's optimism was mirrored by his Head Coach Greg Johnston who felt his playoff-bound team put up ?a really good battle.?

The guys played well and our penalty-killing was good tonight, too. Forgione's big blocked shot on the PK showed the kind of excellent all-round weekend he had for us with two goals last night against Brantford and a key assist in tonight's game.?

Coach Johnston also praised Connor Russo's effort and his big third period goal.

?Connor jumped up big tonight into Godwin's spot due to injury. He battled hard and scored a big goal to put us in a good situation in the third period.?

Although the Tigers were on the short end of the scoreboard on Saturday night, the grittiness and cohesiveness of the team was evident after they surrendered a goal with 6:05 left to fall behind Pickering 4-2.

Aurora's penalty killers took exception to the Panthers taking post-goal liberties with their goalie Glen Crandall who turned in another stellar effort versus Pickering. When the infuriated Tigers goaltender came up swinging and challenging every Panther on the ice, each of the Tigers selected a dance partner and roughing penalties became the order of the day?resulting in a six-man parade to the box.

Russo defended the Tigers' aggressive response to step up to support their big netminder.

?Glen's been the backbone of our team. There was lots of emotion after the Panthers' fourth goal and it was a team effort to defend our goalie. We defend each other like family.?

Pickering jumped out to a 2-0 lead by the midway point of the first period on goals by Aron Jessli and Alex Papaspyropoulos and the Panthers maintained that margin into the first intermission. However, the high-scoring Jessli took two penalties in a row in the second period to give the Tigers' power play consecutive opportunities. With the pugnacious Panther back in the box for tripping at 8:02, Tigers' defenseman Noah DeSantis made Pickering pay when he knocked in a rebound with a power play marker at

6:25?assisted by Peter Lopes and Joseph Martino.

Crandall stood tall throughout the second period, repelling point blank Pickering pucks with a number of remarkable blocker saves and aggressively cutting down shooting angles to take away scoring space from the Panthers.

The Tigers have three regular season games remaining as they close out the month of February: Friday, February 24 at 7.30 p.m. versus Burlington at Central Arena followed by two home games to close out the OJHL regular season?Saturday, February 25 versus Milton at 7.30 p.m. and Monday, February 27 versus Caledon at 8.30 p.m.

By Jim Stewart