

## U22 Panthers close ?gritty? season with ?heartbreaking? fourth-place finish at Provincials

The U22 Central York Panthers closed their 2025-26 season with six inspirational efforts at the Provincial AA playoffs last weekend in Mississauga.

All six of the Junior Panthers' games were decided by one goal and a constant in all three cliffhanger wins and all three heart-wrenching losses was the stellar goaltending provided by Jamie Sanford and Claire Hicks.

Head Coach Steve Dempsey applauded the play of his two netminders in Mississauga and throughout the Panthers' playoff run.

?Claire played well in all our OWHL playoff games. We went with the hot hand especially against Kingston and she helped us win the series. Claire was given the first game against Mississauga. We switched to Jamie in our next two games at the OWHL's and started her at the Provincials. She was outstanding in our 3-2 win over Barrie and the 1-0 loss to Stoney Creek. She's been on a national stage at the 18U finals prior to joining our team so we stayed with her for the opening games. Claire beat London and Jamie beat Stoney Creek the second time around in overtime to get us to the quarters.

?There was so much skill on the ice during the overtime games and both Claire and Jamie made saves when the teams had Grade A scoring chances. With both goalies putting their excellent games on display, it was always a 1 or 1A scenario and it got down to a gut feeling as a coach as to who started.?

In addition to highlighting the skill of his goalies, Coach Dempsey summarized the valiant efforts of his young hockey team over a grueling 70-game campaign: ?It was a gritty season. It was a journey?the players learned about themselves. There was so much growth and they'll be better for it. We were fitter this year and peaked at the right time. Our veterans were ready for heavy playoff games and over the thirteen-game stretch in our League playoffs and the Provincials, there were only three or four periods in which we weren't as competitive as I would have liked.?

Coach Dempsey liked what he saw in Mississauga last weekend as the Panthers toughed out an arduous schedule. The injury-depleted squad played six games in less than three days.

?In 64 hours, we played the equivalent of seven full games including a 3-2 double-overtime win over Stoney Creek on Saturday afternoon followed less than two hours later by a heartbreaking 3-2 loss to Durham West in quadruple OT that ended around midnight. We played the bronze medal game against Mississauga on their big sheet of ice at 9 AM on Sunday and lost 3-2.?

To open Pool Play on Thursday night, the Panthers defeated the Barrie Sharks 3-2.

Coach Dempsey described Central York's victory over the 9th-ranked team in Canada.

?Beating Barrie in Game 1 was huge. A big rivalry has developed between the two regional teams?we have some of their players and they have some of ours.?

In a Game 2 of Pool Play on Friday afternoon, Coach Dempsey described the miniscule difference between Stoney Creek and Central York in the Panthers' narrow 1-0 loss to the #5-ranked team in Canada: ?We were on the big Olympic ice at Iceland. They ran a set play with three minutes left, won the faceoff, and scored.?

Coach Dempsey's determined charges bounced back from the tough loss with a stunning come-from-behind 2-1 victory on Friday night over the London Devilettes.

?We were down 1-0 early, fought back, and got the game winner with less than one minute remaining in regulation. It was a

storybook ending to advance to the quarterfinals.?

In the quarters, the Panthers were gifted with an opportunity to avenge a Pool Play loss to Stoney Creek. Coach Dempsey described the showdown.

?It was a tall order to beat Stoney. It was our fourth game in less than 54 hours, but we played well during the 3-on-3 double overtime. It was crazy to think that we were able to keep the players hydrated with the intensity of the games, but we came to play in those overtime periods.?

In the semifinal versus Durham West, the fatigued Panthers skated into the biggest game of the season at a considerable disadvantage, according to Coach Dempsey.

?Durham was rested with a bye while we played five periods against Stoney Creek. It turned out to be a heartbreaker. We were up 2-1, but they scored to send it into overtime. There were lots of posts and crossbars in the four overtime periods?we were that close to advancing to the gold medal game. Playing a rested team for seven periods after playing five earlier in the day showed our mental fortitude. We walked out of the arena after midnight?having to be back at 9 a.m. to play Mississauga on their own rink.?

Coach Dempsey described his team's steely determination as they worked through a wall of exhaustion against the Hurricanes.

?We were down 2-0, but they answered the bell to tie the game. Given the circumstances, it was an unbelievable experience?an absolute thriller where we showed so much grit and heart in the Bronze medal game.?

The importance of in-game motivation versus the home side was explained by Coach Dempsey.

?After we got down 2-0, we challenged the players to keep building the legacy?to create results that would leave the program better for the next group. For us to come back and tie that game on the big ice was incredible. We were fighting through injuries?we were down to nine forwards after moving one so we could have six on D. Mississauga scored the winning goal with six seconds left. It would have been the first time that the Central York Panthers 22U would have medaled at the Provincials. We were that close.?

**By Jim Stewart**