

## Veteran York-Simcoe Express Coach Ilir Mehmeti becomes Bench Boss of Aurora's Junior Tigers

It's been said by many commentators that the only constant in the twenty-first century is change.

The Aurora Tigers' new Head Coach Ilir Mehmeti embraced change last week when he accepted Owner Jim Thomson's offer to be Bench Boss of the junior hockey club.

"I was ecstatic to get the call from Jim and go over plans for the next few seasons. I'm excited to get the process going. From everything I've been told, we have quality pieces coming back and many of those players have ambitions to play in the OHL."

Mehmeti acknowledged the volatility of OJHL rosters which are fraught with change from season to season and within those seasons through trades and promotions and delineated his plan to create successful junior hockey players who want to play at the next level.

"I want them to have aspirations and attain the highest level of hockey they can get. I had a great talk with [veteran Tigers centre and leading scorer] Cayden Smith who I've known since he was 8. For example, I hope he plays for Erie in the OHL, but, if he's back with us next season, he'll play a vital role. A kid who's moving on to the next level whether it's the OHL or college puts a grin on my face."

The new Junior Tigers' bench boss was similarly pleased by his York-Simcoe Express 16U squad's performance in 2025-26 and considered last season, which was filled with change, to be one of the high points of his lengthy coaching run.

"I've been doing this for a long time. I've been running camps and mentoring players since 2003, but I had a great experience with the 2010 YSE group. It happened to be one of the highlights of my coaching career. We brought in ten new players. We had a core group of nine and the new ten embraced values, culture, and brotherhood. It was the most enjoyable group to coach. We lost in the Finals and no one in the league thought that we'd get there. I've coached two OMHA-winning teams, but this was a group of 19 players committed to the team. The parents were pleased and no one complained about ice time. We ran three lines, split the goaltending 50-50, and it was unique. We set goals and advanced past the round-robin stage in every tournament. Everybody contributed."

Coach Mehmeti added that the timing was right in his life to assume the reins of a junior hockey team after so many successful seasons with the York-Simcoe Express.

"The timing is right for me to coach in the OJHL my three girls have been raised and they've been raised with the same values in my dressing room. I want the culture of the room to be that they're all in it for one another. There's always a brotherhood on a winning team. As a player, I won the Junior loop in 1989 and I'm still best friends with my linemates. It is a brotherhood. The nucleus has to be set by the foundational players in order to create a winning team culture. I'll be looking for hard-working players who are accountable. Successful kids want to know where they stand. Hard work is #1 for me. I can't fix desire or work ethic."

The newly-appointed Tigers' Head Coach noted that his roster will be in flux until mid-summer and noted a few factors that will affect the makeup of his new squad.

"The OHL draft is late this year. We'll see what happens after the prospect camps and after the Draft which is June 13. Even the OJHL Showcase Event in Buffalo in September could affect how the team is comprised during the season."

Despite these factors that affect roster stability, Coach Mehmeti projected calmness amid the storm that is OJHL roster-making.

"I'm content where I am. I'm ecstatic to be here and I hope it's for five years, ten years. I'd like to create continuity and familiarity

and develop junior players so that the Tigers hockey club becomes a place of stability and success.?

Coach Mehmeti takes over a Junior Tigers team that finished the season strongly under Interim Head Coach James Thomson who guided the upstart squad to a 5-3 record after the dismissal of Aurora Bench Boss Darcy Roy. Thomson?who was set to serve as Head Coach and General Manager of the Aurora Junior Tigers for the 2026-27 season?accepted an Assistant Coaching job with the Ontario Tech Ridgebacks of the OUA in April.

### **Coaching Carousel at the ACC**

Iilir Mehmeti is the fourth Head Coach hired by the Aurora Tigers since December 2023 when former NHLer Greg Johnston was relieved of his duties.

Despite guiding his 2022-23 squad to the OJHL playoffs and impelling the competitive 2023-24 Junior Tigers into seventh place in the OJHL standings by Christmas, the congenial Johnston was replaced by Thomas Milne in mid-season. A fire sale ensued with many of the club's top players shipped off to the Toronto Junior Canadians, and Milne's depleted team?unfortunately mired in mediocrity ? missed the playoffs.

In subsequent campaigns after Milne's firing, the Tigers missed the playoffs under Coaches Roy and Thomson in 2024-25 and 2025-26, respectively.

Despite this flurry of changes in the coaching ranks, hope springs eternal in the Jungle with a new sheriff in Town and a strong core of players, developed by Coaches Roy and Thomson, returning to Aurora for 2026-27.

**By Jim Stewart**