

## Weekend sweep of Nepean and Kingston preps Panthers for showdown with Chinese National Team

The Central York Panthers will carry a high degree of confidence and momentum into their showdown with the Chinese National Women's Hockey team on January 26 at the ACC.

With such a significant exhibition game circled on the calendar, the Panthers needed to sweep their weekend home-stand versus the Nepean Wildcats and the Kingston Icewolves.

Mission accomplished.

The momentum needed to face the Chinese National team this Sunday started last Saturday afternoon when Central York solved the riddle of Wildcats' goaltender Zoe Cliché. The athletic netminder stole a game from the Panthers in the nation's capital on October 27 when she made 37 saves and led Nepean to a 1-0 shootout victory.

The Panthers' decisive 5-2 win versus Nepean on Saturday felt different as the home team struck early and often. Head Coach Steve Dempsey suggested that the team's season-long shooting drills are transforming his diligent U22 squad.

Our shooting drills that we've been working on for months are beginning to pay dividends. We're shooting the puck better. Overall, we shot the puck very well today and scored a number of goal scorers' goals. We also got to the front of the net and took away Cliché's sightlines.

Five minutes into Saturday's contest, Nepean's Lexie Hatoum fired a low wrist shot that beat Panthers' goaltender Izzy Whynot glove side to give the visitors a 1-0 lead.

However, the home side rallied with a series of highlight reel goals that subdued the Wildcats.

Panthers' rugged defender Mackenzie Cotey set up by Elizabeth Janovski and Amber Esterbrooks rifled a laser from the right point that beat Cliché high glove side to pull the home team into a 1-1 tie.

Annabella Van Berkel's persistence was rewarded when she banged in her own rebound behind Cliché 2:46 into the second period to give the Panthers a 2-1 lead.

Solving Cliché early in the game was a big step forward for the Panthers, according to Captain Cheyenne Degeer, who noted pregame, We've had a hard time scoring against Nepean this year. We outshot them by a wide margin in our shootout loss earlier in the season. Beating Cliché today will be a big factor in our success.

These were prescient words by the Captain and Degeer's unassisted marker contributed to her team's success. The speedy forward found open ice, created a clear-cut breakaway, and fired a wicked wrist shot that bulged the twine behind Cliché.

Degeer's picturesque goal was her 22nd of the season and solidified her hold on second place in the OWHL scoring race with 41 points.

In another goal-scorers' goal applauded post-game by Coach Dempsey, Ashley Minor's perfectly-timed jump at the Wildcats' blue line intercepted a clearing pass. The Panthers' defender set the caught puck down on the ice and her quick release from between the circles handcuffed Cliché.

Minor's snapshot went through the wickets and into the Wildcats' cage to give Central York a three-goal lead.

Four minutes later, Terry Wang's perfect pass sent Esterbrooks on a clear-cut breakaway and the veteran sniper rifled a wrist shot just under the crossbar, moving the mesh behind Cliché, and evoking a big Panther party as the home side staked itself to a commanding 5-1 lead.

It was evident that the Panthers had solved their Nepean nemesis?scoring more goals in two periods against Cliché than they had in two previous games.

On Sunday afternoon at SARC, Central York won in a vastly different manner. The Panthers needed two late third period goals to edge the Icewolves 2-1. After two scoreless periods during which Central York held the edge in play and outshot Kingston 22-10, it was the Icewolves that took the lead when Claire Chambers beat Panthers' goaltender Samantha Whittle less than five minutes into the final frame.

It was the only puck that eluded Whittle as she turned aside 16 of 17 shots to earn the W.

Cotey, as she did on Saturday afternoon versus the Wildcats, got the Panthers on the scoreboard and tied the game with 4:55 remaining. Degeer and Zoe Li earned assists on Cotey's fourth of the season.

When Icewolves' blueliner Grace Wolsey drew a tripping penalty with 3:27 remaining, it proved costly for the visitors and turned out to be the turning point of the game.

The assertive Panthers would not be denied and, at 2:05, Van Berkel sniped the game-winning goal past Icewolves' goaltender Aneta Senkova.

Keira Johnson and Klaire Essex drew assists on the climactic marker that solved Senkova?who had held the Panthers scoreless for 55 minutes. Van Berkel's clutch goal?her eleventh of the season--allowed the Panthers to sweep their home-stand and improve the club's eighth-place record to 19-10-2 in the 25-team OWHL.

With these key wins in the books, the Central York Panthers will turn their attention to the biggest exhibition hockey game that the Town of Aurora has hosted since the Swiss and Swedish national women's teams treated locals to a great warmup to the 2024 IIHF championships.

Remarkably, the CYP-China contest is free of charge so local fans can get a sneak peek at a future Olympics squad taking on the U22 Panthers. Puck drop for this international exhibition game on Sunday, January 26 is 2.30 p.m. at the Aurora Community Centre.

**By Jim Stewart**