

Whitby Wolves wreck Central York Panthers' party



One of the memorable moments in the classic film *Forrest Gump* is when the protagonist, played by Tom Hanks, punches out a misogynistic hippie at a Black Panthers' gathering. Gump apologizes to the urban paramilitary unit by drawing: 'Sorry I ruined your Panthers' party.'

Similar words could have spoken by the Whitby Wolves on Sunday afternoon. The visitors skated into SARC for the Panthers' last regular season home game, edged them 5-3 in a spirited tilt, and wrecked the home club's 'Seniors Day' send-off festivities. The Panthers rolled out an impressive pre-game ceremony, featuring Team Canada Olympian and PWHL Toronto defender Renata Fast, to honor their four US College-bound players: Captain Hannah Clarke ' Providence College Friars in Providence, Rhode Island; Hannah Franz ' Wilkes University Colonels in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania; Jade Lore ' University of Connecticut Huskies in Storrs, Connecticut; and Hailey Maguire ' Big Green of Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire.

Fast dropped the puck in the pregame ceremonial faceoff between the captains whose squads were both in need of two points. The Wolves are battling Burlington for the OWHL's third seed. The Panthers are in a four-team dogfight with Mississauga, Cambridge, and Waterloo for the eighth seed. Seeds 1-8 in the OWHL earn a bye into the upcoming provincial playoffs.

On a blustery and snowy March afternoon, the similarly icy SARC was rammed to capacity with hundreds of fans assembled in the bleachers and also congregated six-deep in the mezzanine—including dozens of young Panthers players sporting the organization's colors, catching a glimpse of an Olympics and PWHL hero, and watching two terrific U22 hockey clubs.

Unfortunately, after the emotional pre-game ceremony and a big win in Burlington on Saturday, the Panthers came out flat and trailed 4-1 halfway through the second period—a fact bemoaned by Head Coach Steve Dempsey who was philosophical about the untimely loss to the Wolves: 'Emotions were running high and it was hard for our players to compartmentalize the celebrations that took place in the dressing room and on the ice. Their lifetime achievement in a sport was being recognized. We take a lot of pride as a hockey club in our players' achievements. It's understandable that we didn't have the same fire and didn't do the little things that we did yesterday against Burlington. We just didn't put forth the level of execution into our game plan as we did on Saturday.'

Coach Dempsey continued to contrast the weekend results: 'I'm hoping that today's game is an anomaly because we looked playoff-ready on Saturday in Burlington, but didn't look that way this afternoon.'

After a 'playoff-ready' 3-1 win on Saturday versus the Barracudas in Burlington, the Panthers fell behind early on Sunday afternoon. Five minutes into the game, Wolves' forward Rylan Haslam created space off the right circle and sniped a puck high glove side past Panthers' netminder Izzy Whynot to give the visitors an early 1-0 lead.

The Panthers evened the score ninety seconds later at 13:32 when Alessia Stoikos fired a wrist shot from the left faceoff circle that beat Wolves' goalie Mya Lucifora high short side. Assists were earned by Klaire Essex and Franz on the tying goal.

However, Sydney Sawyer one-timed a short-handed goal off the pipe and past Whynot at 9:48 to restore the Wolves' lead. Less than three minutes later, on a Whitby power play, Haslam's second goal gave her team a 3-1 lead that deflated the large crowd assembled at SARC.

Equally-deflating was the Wolves' fourth goal in the second period that came after the Panthers kept the visitors pinned in their own zone and poured on the pressure, but Hannah Thornton flicked a backhand high over Whynot's shoulder to give Whitby a commanding 4-1 lead at 10:45.

After penalty killer Cheyenne Degeer was stoned by Lucifora on a clear-cut breakaway and teammate Clara Williams beat Lucifora but not the goal post at 5:25, ?Captain Clarke? ended fifteen minutes of frustration for her club when she rifled a wrist shot past Lucifora at 4:48 to pull the Panthers within two by the second intermission.

With a big comeback needed, Coach Dempsey deployed five of his top-scoring players?Li, Clarke, Degeer, Buckley, and McGuire ? to start the third period.

The strategy worked immediately. Within 15 seconds, Li lit the lamp behind Lucifora, with assists earned by Buckley and Degeer, to pull the Panthers to within one of the visitors. Whynot made four big saves in the ensuing four minutes to keep the Wolves off the scoreboard and preserve the possibility of a Panthers' comeback.

Unfortunately, the hungry Wolves would not be denied on Seniors Day with seven of their own graduates in the lineup.

Alice Brock fired a shot high blocker side from between the circles to restore Whitby's two-goal lead?a dart that took the air out of the blue, red, and yellow balloons festooning the north end zone plexiglass behind Whynot.

When Kyla Kenyon of the Wolves drew a penalty at 4:21 of the final frame, Coach Dempsey called a timeout, pulled Whynot to place an extra attacker in the Wolves' zone, and tried to manoeuvre another miracle on ice. Sadly, Sunday was not the day for turning water into wine for Central York.

The Junior Panthers end their OWHL regular season schedule with a two-game road trip: on Saturday, March 16 in North York versus the Storm (15-19-1-3) and on St. Patrick's Day in Toronto versus the Leaside Wildcats (12-25-2-3). Two wins will guarantee Central York the sought-after eighth seed and a bye to the provincial championships.

By Jim Stewart