

## Zoe Li leads Junior Panthers to 2-1 OT victory over Team China in front of 850 fans at the ACC



The Aurora Community Centre was the place to be for hockey fans on Sunday afternoon.

In the biggest Junior hockey game played in Aurora this season, 850 fans filled the venerable arena for an exhibition game between the U22 Central York Panthers and Team China.

Veteran Panther forward Zoe Li spurred her team's offence with the game-winning goal in overtime and a key power play assist in the second period as Central York edged Team China 2-1.

The hard-working Li sent Aurora's hockey fans home happy when she beat Team China goalie Laila Lai at 4:33 of the first overtime period. Li, who is the Junior Panthers' third-leading scorer with seven goals and 16 assists this season, converted a pass from Central York Captain Cheyenne Degeer for the dramatic game-winning-goal.

The exhibition game, sponsored by Canadian Tire, was not short on ceremony. The white-clad People's Republic of China national team skated on to the ice led by two Panther flag bearers and was greeted by a warm round of applause from the friendly ACC crowd.

After the anthems were sung, Mayor Tom Mrakas, CYGHA Mark Dubeau, and MPP Dawn Gallagher Murphy presided over the Ceremonial Faceoff. A pin exchange between Panther Captain Cheyenne Degeer and Team China Captain Barry Yu concluded the ceremonies and the two teams posed for a centre ice photo to mark the historic occasion.

The Panthers controlled the opening minutes of the game and Panther goalie Izzy Whynot was not tested until the 14:32 mark of the first period. However, it was Whynot's heroics between the pipes during her forty-minute performance that kept the Junior Panthers from succumbing to the older, bigger women's team.

Team China is ranked 16th in the world and preparing for an IIHF-sanctioned Olympic qualification tournament to be held February 6 ? 9 in Tomakomai, Japan.

The Chinese National Women's team will compete with the host country, France, and Poland for a berth in the 2026 Winter Olympics in Milan.

Due to this short preparation schedule, Team China was all business at the ACC on Sunday afternoon and provided a stern test for the Junior Panthers who are ranked 8th in the 25-team U22 Elite OWHL.

Despite the pressure asserted by both offences, Lai and Whynot put forth stellar performances to keep opposing shooters off the scoresheet after twenty minutes of play.

With nine minutes to go in a tightly-fought second period, the Panthers' power play broke the scoreless tie. Li passed to Amber Esterbrooks who created open ice against the Team China defenders and made a strong move off the left circle, firing a wrist shot which Lai stopped. However, Lai surrendered a juicy rebound on the doorstep that Erica Buckley banged home to give the Junior Panthers a 1-0 lead heading into second intermission.

The resilient Team China squad replied with a power play goal of their own at 16:20 of the final frame when Judy Wang beat Panther netminder Samantha Whittle with assists earned by Ying Ying Guan and Annie Quan.

In addition to the thrilling international hockey game, there was a carnival atmosphere at the ACC on Sunday afternoon.

All three concessions booths were open and the classic old arena was filled with hundreds of Central York Panthers players proudly adorned in their colorful rep and house league jerseys. A few PWHL jerseys were sprinkled here and there throughout the crowd to show the second-year pro league's sustainability.

Pregame lobby activities included a photo booth, scavenger hunt, sign making, bracelet making, face painting, a PWHL Merch Pop Up featuring Toronto Sceptres gear, and an interactive stick handler.

The Panthers also held an autograph session including friendship bracelet swapping with fans and Team China.

**By Jim Stewart**