

Amber Esterbrooks's hat trick bedevils London in Panthers' 6-2 win



Amber Esterbrook scored three goals—including the game-winner—and Zoe Li contributed three assists to lead the U22 Central York Panthers to a 6-2 win over the London Devilettes in OWHL action on Saturday afternoon at SARC.

The depth of the Central York Panthers' Girls Hockey organization was on full display on the weekend.

Six players from the U18 Panthers shored up the injury-ridden Junior squad and contributed two goals.

18U Panthers Clara Liu and Abby Pak contributed to the winning effort versus the Devilettes with a goal each and Klaire Essex tallied the opening goal as the Panthers (18-7-0) led from start to finish.

The Panthers controlled play in the opening ten minutes, hemming in the Devilettes with aggressive forechecking and peppering London netminder Harlow Kaniuk-Barker with pucks from all over the offensive zone.

The Panthers outshot the Devilettes 19-3 in the first period and took a 1-0 lead at 10:49 when Essex one-timed a perfectly-centred slot pass from power play partner Erica Buckley.

Liu's wrist shot from the blue line wriggled through a line of players and eluded Kaniuk-Barker at 5:58 to put the Panthers up by two.

Alessia Stoikos earned the assist on the 18U Panther's marker.

Central York's effective penalty-killing was on display in the opening frame as Cheyenne Degeer and Zoe Li played keep-away with the Devilettes' beleaguered power play unit.

Degeer and Li created short-handed scoring opportunities with their speed and diligent checking.

Isabelle Whynot proved the adage that goalies are the best penalty killers when the Panthers' netminder made big saves to preserve her team's two-goal lead.

Esterbrooks' hat trick began in earnest fourteen seconds into the middle frame. The speedy forward created a breakaway from Zoe Li's pass and slipped the puck past Kaniuk-Barker to propel the Panthers to a 3-0 lead.

The offensive onslaught by the home side continued as the Panthers' superior puck control entertained the 120 spectators at SARC and nullified the Devilettes' considerable size advantage.

However, London got on the scoreboard at 11:17 when Aviah Braner knocked in a rebound past Whynot to narrow Central York's lead to 3-1.

Braner's marker seemed to inspire the Devilettes, but another strong stand by the Panthers PK and stellar saves by Whynot maintained the Panthers' tenuous two-goal margin.

With 5:52 left in the second period, the Panthers' dynamic duo of Esterbrooks and Li struck again when Esterbrooks converted a Li rebound amid a goalmouth scramble.

Esterbrooks' second goal gave CYP a 4-1 lead heading into the second intermission and she completed her hat-trick nineteen seconds into the third period to put the home side up by four.

Panthers' leading scorer Degeer, who is 11th in the OWHL scoring race, and Li earned assists on Esterbrook's third goal of the game.

Esterbrooks commented on the importance of her early goals in the second and third periods: "The goals early in the period got us going. I know my first goal was off the faceoff and winning faceoffs created opportunities on all three goals."

She described her game-winning goal to start the second period that gave the Panthers' a 3-0 lead.

"We used our speed really well. The middle of the ice was open. The goal got us ahead and we operated with lots of energy when we took a three-goal lead."

After Esterbrooks recorded her third goal of the contest, the 18U call-up combo of Abby Pak and Elizabeth Janovski provided the Junior Panthers with their sixth goal. Pak pounced on Janovski's rebound and flicked it past Kaniuk-Barker to give the home side a five-goal cushion at 14:25.

Stoikos earned her second assist of the game on Pak's goal.

The Devilettes' power play finally broke through after a multitude of opportunities when Bramer notched her second goal of the game to narrow the Panthers' lead to 6-2 with 6:23 to play.

Despite giving up the late power play goal to the Devilettes, Panthers' Captain Hannah Clarke was pleased with her team's overall penalty-killing performance: "We were really good today. We responded to the pressure with the right mindset. Our breakouts were really good today, too. We knew what we were doing."

The veteran team leader also credited the 18U Panthers' presence in the win versus London.

"Definitely, they were a big help. The 18Us are talented and hard-working."

Clarke delineated the keys to beating the Nepean Wildcats on Sunday: "Having the call-ups is a big thing with all our injuries. We'll need to be able to use our speed against Nepean. We'll need to control the play at both ends and to control our sloppiness."

Captain Clarke's post-game words on Saturday were prescient, indeed, as they related to Sunday's winning formula versus Nepean. The Panthers controlled both ends of the ice with a "full throttle" 5-0 victory over the Wildcats on Sunday afternoon. The shutout avenged an early season Panthers' loss in the nation's capital.

The Junior Panthers jumped out to a 3-0 first period lead versus Nepean on Sunday at SARC with a pair of power play goals by

Buckley and Li. Buckley tallied her second goal of the frame to give Central York a three-goal cushion heading into intermission.

Clara Williams and Degeer each earned two assists in the high octane opening twenty minutes of play.

Williams hit the goal-scoring column of the scoresheet at 17:01 of the second period?with Buckley and Degeer earning assists.

Captain Clarke's power play goal closed the scoring at 16:31 of the third period with helpers from Li and 18U call-up Abby Pak. Isabelle Whynot earned her third shutout of the season, blocking all 22 shots she faced.

The Panthers' next home game is Saturday, January 20 at 1.55 p.m. versus the Cambridge Rivulettes at SARC.

By Jim Stewart