

Rookie-laden Tigers lineup puts up fight versus Leamington Flyers in narrow 3-2 loss

The Leamington Flyers, resplendent in their red jerseys befitting a team from Ketchup Country, must have been salivating with expectation when they looked across the ice at the Aurora Tigers' first-year OJHL starting lineup on Saturday night at the ACC.

As the starting five of the Flyers lined up for player introductions and the national anthem, Leamington looked loose and filled with mirth at the prospect of playing a gutted hockey team sporting a 1-11-1-1 record since firing Head Coach and former NHLer Greg Johnston six weeks ago.

To add to the home team's peril, Aurora's fourth captain this year, Keegan Decaluwe, and Assistant Captain Connor Russo are both out with injuries.

Despite having no leadership letters on their jerseys, the Aurora Tigers put forth one of their most entertaining performances of the season.

The rookie-laden, eleventh-seeded Tigers (10-22-2-2) were edged 3-2 by the third-seeded Flyers (19-9-4-0), but Aurora skated with Leamington from the opening puck drop.

Tigers Coach Tom Milne deployed all his skaters and rolled lines skillfully as Aurora held the edge in play during the first period, outshooting the Flyers 11-6. The young Tigers responded to the equalized ice time and played an urgent "200-foot game" even though the Tigers' grand old arena built in 1966 isn't quite regulation length at 185 feet.

The Tigers also received a heroic effort between the pipes from rookie netminder Yianni Karkoulas, who stopped 34 of 37 shots and offered upbeat insights following the narrow loss to the Flyers.

"That was our best full game all year. Everyone was going tonight." Karkoulas acknowledged the youthful composition of the squad in front of him.

"We came in here tonight to give a top team like Leamington a strong game. We were excited about playing as underdogs. As a team of mostly rookie players, we're embracing the opportunities."

Karkoulas's remarks about the fighting spirit of the young squad was evident in the opening period.

Although Leamington's Brayden Degelas opened the scoring when he lifted the puck over Karkoulas at 16:33 of the first period, the Tigers responded immediately.

Newly-acquired Josh Frenette's hustle to the puck drew a Flyers' penalty eight seconds after the visitors' opening goal. Seventeen seconds later, a trio of rookie Tigers tied the game 1-1. Carson Littlejohn, a strong-skating sturdy defenseman acquired from the Toronto Junior Canadiens, teed up a blast by fellow defenseman Liam Longo from the blue line and Frenette banged in the rebound past Flyers' goaltender Carson Barnes.

It was Frenette's second goal with the Tigers since arriving from the Toronto Junior Canadiens. The intense power forward blocked shots, drew penalties, and created scoring opportunities for his new club.

Karkoulas, who had a front row seat to Frenette's strong two-way game, offered a glowing post-game assessment of his fellow rookie.

"He's the future. Josh is getting great opportunities to play. He was out there blocking shots in front of me and his goal tonight

showed his skills. He's a great player on our top line [with rookie forwards Frank Castiglione and Kenny Wu].?

The athletic Tigers' goaltender, who was named Second Star of the Game by OJHL staff, complimented his young defense corps which included a fine first game performance by 6'8", 205 pound defender Lars Derstroff ?acquired by the Tigers from the PJHL Penetang Kings.

?The guys were clearing space for me so I could see and they were blocking shots. Lars had a good first game with us.?

In another promising development, young Tigers Adam Matar?who scored against Haliburton on Friday night ? and Kyle Baston spent the first period and second period hitting any player in a red jersey. The plucky Tigers were full value and up to the challenge of playing the West Conference's #3 seed.

Karkoulas picked up his young team repeatedly during the second and third periods?repelling 29 of the 31 shots by the Flyers. Leamington's Landon Bernard's slap shot from the left circle at 11:56 of the second period beat Karkoulas on the stick side after the Flyers conducted a passing clinic while on the power play.

Degelas's second goal of the game with nine minutes left in the third period came off a clear-cut breakaway. The Flyer's skillful deke of the athletic Karkoulas gave Leamington a 3-1 lead nine minutes into the final frame.

Aurora Coach Tom Milne called a timeout with four minutes remaining, pulled Karkoulas, and the Tigers put the pressure on Leamington. After Frenette thwarted a Flyers' empty net scoring attempt, the Tigers seemed buoyed by Frenette's shinpad save and reasserted their 6-on-5 advantage. Baston's excellent forechecking efforts were rewarded with 1:53 left in the game when he scored his fifth goal of the season to narrow Leamington's lead to 3-2.

Jack Rispin's blast from the point was redirected by Bode Pearson and jammed in by Baston. Despite a valiant closing effort that caused a panicky Flyers' timeout with 42.4 seconds left, the home team could not notch the equalizer and Leamington packed a narrow road win aboard their bus back to the ?Tomato Capital of Canada.?

By Jim Stewart