

Tigers eliminated in OJHL quarterfinals



(Tigers react to their sudden death loss on Monday night. Auroran photo by Jake Courtepatte)

By Jake Courtepatte

They played catch-up right from Game one: but the results are no less heartbreaking.

After clawing back from a 2 ? 0 deficit in their best-of-seven OJHL conference quarterfinal series with the Wellington Dukes, the Aurora Tigers were sent packing Monday night in a marathon Game 6.

The Tigers entered last weekend with new life, having taken Game 3 on Wednesday to cut the series deficit to 2 ? 1.

Friday's crowd of almost 500 fans at the Aurora Community Centre watched Josh Boyko put up another fantastic performance between the pipes, stopping 26 of the 27 shots he faced while cruising to a 5 ? 1 victory.

Wellington retook the series lead in their own home barn on Sunday, squeaking out a 4 ? 3 win and the first chance of advancing the following day.

Scoring 13 goals over the past three games seemed to signal a re-energized Tigers heading to Game 6, whose offence has struggled since the beginning of the New Year and has relied heavily on steady goaltending. Fans of both sides, packing the ACC to the rafters, were given quite an offensive show in Game 6.

Noah Delmas opened the scoring for the Tigers just three minutes in on the powerplay, allowing the Dukes' starting goaltender, Olivier Lafreniere, to make only three of four stops before leaving the game with injury.

He was replaced by Sam Tanguay, who was seeing his second action in two nights.

The lead was short lived, as Wellington stormed back with three goals in just over a minute to take a 3 ? 1 lead of their own. The Aurora coaching staff kept faith in their starter, allowing Boyko to settle in for the rest of the period as the Tigers added two more goals of their own, off the sticks of Liam Neuman and Spencer Herbst, to tie the game at three after twenty minutes.

Neuman scored two minutes into the second on a scrambled play in front of the Wellington net, countered by a centering pass

sneaking through the pads of Boyko shortly after. Wellington regained a 5 ? 4 lead, and took it to the second intermission, when a tipped puck found the five-hole of Boyko.

Evan Kearns scored his third of the playoffs in the final frame after a few rebound whacks, a 5 ? 5 score that held up to bring the do-or-die game to sudden-death overtime.

Power went out in the ACC during play late in the first extra period, and when the lights flipped back on a few minutes later, it seemed to be a fitting foreshadow as Ben Sokay buried his fourth of the night past Boyko to shut off the lights on another Tigers season.

Neuman, though outshone by the winning side's Sokay and both goaltenders who made over 40 saves apiece, quietly contributed on every home goal of the night, notching three assists to go with his two goals.

Following the game, support for the Tigers came pouring in.

Aurora Mayor Geoff Dawe, who took in the game at the rink, congratulated the Dukes on their win as well as the Tigers for an exciting season.

Luca Fantino, one of many minor hockey players who came out in droves this postseason with his friends and parents, said it was the most exciting hockey he had ever seen.

?The kids are so happy to be here,? said Luca's father Daniel. ?Unfortunately that's it, but we had kids all season who were talking about the Tigers in the dressing room, outside of hockey too.?

The Tigers bow out in the first round of the OJHL playoffs for the first time since 2013. The fourth-seeded Dukes will move on to face the first-ranked Trenton Golden Hawks in the conference semifinals, while the second-seeded Markham Royals will face the third-seeded Kingston Voyageurs.