

## WSHL WEEKLY NOTES – MID-WEST DIVISION



**DALLAS SNIPERS (10-29-0, 20 pts)**

[WSHLDallasSnipers.pointstreaksites.com](http://WSHLDallasSnipers.pointstreaksites.com)

[@DallasSnipers](https://twitter.com/DallasSnipers)

The Dallas Snipers earned a three-game series sweep for the first time since October, sweeping their Mid-Western Division rivals, the Wichita Jr. Thunder, at home over the weekend.

All three Sniper goalies played over the weekend with Manny Legace (42 saves), Rafael Goncalves (20), and Evan Williams (39) each earning victories.

Michael Pistek continued his hot play of late, scoring a 2-8-10 line against the Jr. Thunder. That brings Pistek up to 33 points this season – his first full year with Dallas.

Sterling Cooper was up to his old tricks, scoring a 3-4-7 line, and now leads the team with an impressive 21-34-55 line for the year. Cooper's 55 points this season matches his previous three seasons combined.

Head Coach Aaron Davis credits Cooper's impressive year to his work ethic.

"Hard work and wanting to become better to help the team," Davis said of Cooper's qualities. "He has been with me the last four years and in his first two, he had some injuries that limited his games. He has put in the work over the summers and has become a great player. I am glad to see these guys growing into better hockey players daily."

Dallas continues with Wichita when they travel to Kansas for the final three-game set with the Jr. Thunder this weekend.

**EL PASO RHINOS (37-1-1, 75 pts)**

[www.ElPasoRhinos.com](http://www.ElPasoRhinos.com)

**@El\_Paso\_Rhinos**

El Paso was off this past weekend, their last bye week before the playoffs, but there was a lot of activity in the Rhinos front office.

El Paso, the host team for the 2018 Thorne Cup Tournament, acquired Jakob Kranabetter, Nikita Pintusov, and Christopher Westover from the Valencia Flyers. Kranabetter recently became the WSHL's all-time leader in assists leader, and is poised to also earn break the league's all-time mark for points. With 94 points on the season, Kranabetter now sits as the leading scorer in the Midwest Division, one point ahead of Oklahoma City's Ivan Bondarenko.

Pintusov was the third-leading point-scorer on Valencia prior to the trade, but led the team in goals with 32. Chaseton Sare had been El Paso's only 30+ goal-scorer prior to the trade.

Westover will bring a big veteran presence to the El Paso blueline, as they build up to take on the high-powered offenses in the Thorne Cup.

In the meantime, the Rhinos continue to be involved with their community, and this weekend's set with the Mountain Division's Colorado Jr. Eagles will continue that trend. After their United Blood Services series to benefit blood donation, this weekend series will be presented by the El Maida Shrine who service the El Paso surrounding areas in many ways including through their numerous hospitals nationwide.

At the end of their February 24 game with Dallas, the Rhino players will hold their 8th Annual St. Baldrick's Head Shaving Event to benefit the fight against childhood cancer.

El Paso's final regular season home series with Wichita will be Kids Weekend and will conclude with a "Paint the Ice" event wherein families will be handed paint to add their own stamp on the Rhino ice.

Rhino players like Chaseton Sare (38-35-73), Austin Simpson (21-38-59), and Filip Krasanovsky (1.47/.928, 28 wins) have made their mark already on the success of this season's Rhino squad. But, it's the players who may not show up on the score sheet every game that Head Coach Cory Herman shines some light on for his team's season.

"The unsung heroes are all of our players who don't play every game," Herman said. "They come to practice everyday, give 110%, and never complain if they are in the lineup or not. They just wait for their opportunity."

That bodes well for the depth of this El Paso team as they head to the grind of the playoffs after a season in which every team is gunning for them.

It'll be a big series with the Jr. Eagles this weekend as the Colorado team looks to take over first place in the Mountains. El Paso will look to play spoiler beginning Friday at the Sierra Providence Events Center.

### **OKLAHOMA CITY BLAZERS (32-5-2, 66 pts)**

[www.OKCityHockey.com](http://www.OKCityHockey.com)

[@OKCBlazersWSHL](https://twitter.com/OKCBlazersWSHL)

The Oklahoma City Blazers fell to a hungry Springfield squad in a shootout in their only game of the past week. The Express have been a thorn in the side of OKC in each of the previous eight games between the Mountain Division rivals, and this weekend was no different with the teams trading punches beginning early in the game.

Vitalii Mikhailov scored his 23rd goal of the season to open the scoring less than a minute into the game, but Springfield answered back with two more before the Blazers' Jordan Sgro sniped his 11th to tie the game at two apiece just eight minutes into the first period.

Of their eight one-goal games this season (five of which went into OT), the Blazers won six of them including three one-goal victories against Springfield. So, these two teams have been playing hard all year and OKC's success in tight games bodes well for them heading into the playoffs.

Bobby Cloutier continued to shine in the Blazers' crease making 51 saves against Springfield and bringing his season SV% up to .925 to go along with an impressive 2.36 GAA.

Oklahoma City will continue the pre-playoff tune up with their final three games against Springfield this weekend before facing off with Dallas, Wichita, and Casper to close out the regular season.

**SPRINGFIELD EXPRESS (21-15-6, 48 pts)**

[www.SpringfieldExpress.com](http://www.SpringfieldExpress.com)

**@\_ExpressHockey**

Springfield continues to play OKC well, winning their lone game this past weekend in the shootout. The two teams traded punches – as they've done all year – scoring four goals in the game's first eight minutes before the goalies took over. The Express and Blazers combined for a remarkable 103 shots on net with the goalies combining for 97 saves. I don't know if that's a record, but it's gotta be close.

Kayne Pasquet made 46 saves including 29 in the 2nd and 3rd periods in Springfield's first victory against their Mid-Western Division rivals this season.

Vegard Faret, his 26th of the season, Bruno Ndossi (16th), and Akos Szigeti (21st) each scored for the Express.

Springfield is now 10-3-0 since the Vegas Shootout, putting a lot of space between them and Dallas, but not quite able to catch up to the Blazers in the Mid-Western Division standings.

Still, this is a team that has the potential to crush some hearts come playoff time. Springfield has played in no less than 15 one-goal games, going 5-4-6 including games against the likes of OKC, Colorado, El Paso, and Ontario – all formidable opponents. When the playoffs come, it games sometimes come down to who gets the lucky bounce and the Express have proven to play really good teams down to that point.

If Springfield can get the lucky bounces in the postseason, they could make a bit of a run.

OKC and Springfield will close out their season series with three more games this weekend, again, in Missouri. From there, the Express will have two weeks off before

visiting Dallas to take on the Snipers. Springfield then hosts Wichita for their final games of the year.

**WICHITA JR. THUNDER (3-33-0, 6 pts)**

[www.WichitaJuniorThunder.com](http://www.WichitaJuniorThunder.com)

[@JrThunderHockey](#)

The Jr. Thunder played some tough games with division rivals Dallas this past weekend, but fell short in losing three straight to the Snipers.

Tyler Inlow (7-6-13) and David Zarycki (4-7-11) each scored twice over the weekend and the Jr. Thunder got some big games from all three of their goalies.

Austin Tilton made 26 saves Friday, Trace Parker made 40 on Saturday, and Nathaniel Merriman worked hard making 43 saves in Sunday's close game.

Head coach Rob Weingartner knows his team's progress is important and he sees some growth in his team this year.

"Unfortunately, we haven't gotten the results we were hoping for in regards to winning games, but we have improved in many areas of our game," Weingartner said. "We had some really good games this past weekend versus Dallas, we had a lots of shots on goal and worked hard from start to finish which was a good sign."

Normally a team that gets outshot, Wichita has turned up the heat on opposing goalies of late and coach Weingartner said that will be the difference moving forward.

"We have to earn our luck and keep pushing to get better at scoring goals. Getting to the net for rebounds has been one of the biggest struggles this year," he said.

The Jr. Thunder started the season with a full slate of games and will close out the season with another full slate.

This weekend, they'll close out their season series with the Snipers before facing off with OKC, Springfield, and El Paso twice.

"The boys are excited we get to see Dallas again this weekend at home," Weingartner said. "If we continue to play like we have, we should be rewarded with a win or two."

--- *Tyler Whidden for Harrington Sports Media*