

MID-WESTERN DIVISION SEMIFINAL PREVIEW



Photo provided by: Mark Mauno

#4 DALLAS SNIPERS @ #1 EL PASO RHINOS

Best-of-three series/all games at Sierra Providence Events Center, El Paso TX

GAME 1 Friday, March 23 7:00 p.m.

GAME 2 Saturday, March 24 7:00 p.m.

GAME 3* Sunday, March 25 7:00 p.m.

**if necessary*

SEASON SERIES

El Paso 9-0-0, 18 points

Dallas 0-9-0, 0 points

October 6 El Paso 5 @ Dallas 0

October 7 El Paso 9 @ Dallas 1

October 8 El Paso 10 @ Dallas 2

January 26 Dallas 0 @ El Paso 13

January 27 Dallas 0 @ El Paso 16

January 28 Dallas 1 @ El Paso 3

February 23 El Paso 11 @ Dallas 0

February 24 El Paso 7 @ Dallas 1

February 25 El Paso 11 @ Dallas 0

PREVIOUS PLAYOFF MEETINGS

This is the third time that the Rhinos and Snipers have met in the playoffs - all three times in the division semifinals. El Paso swept Dallas, two games to none, in both 2014 and 2015.

PLAYOFF HISTORY

El Paso - The Rhinos have made the playoffs in all 12 years of their existence. If they eliminate Dallas they will also have at least one playoff series in all 12 years. They have won their divisional playoff seven times and have made it to the Thorne Cup championship series or tournament eight times. They were crowned Thorne Cup champions in 2008 and 2014. They defeated Idaho, 7-3, in the 2014 championship game played in El Paso. The Rhinos have failed to win the divisional playoff in each of the last two years.

Dallas - This makes six straight playoff appearances for the Snipers. Their lone playoff series win came over Wichita in 2015.

EL PASO RHINOS

Head coach: Cory Herman

49-1-1, 1st place - Mid-Western Division

405 GF / 63 GA

EL PASO SPECIAL TEAMS

POWER PLAY 65/200 (32.5%, 1st in WSHL)

PENALTY KILL 16/249 (93.6%, 1st in WSHL - 38 SHG)

KEY PLAYERS

F Jakob Kranabetter (44-84-128), F Austin Simpson (38-60-98), Chaseton Sare (51-45-96), F Nikita Pintusov (14-12-26 in 11 games with ELP), Philip Pugliese (24-57-81), D Justin-Cole Dubecky (18-58-76), D Colby Haugen (9-36-45), G Filip Krasanovsky (35-1-1/1.35/.929/11 shutouts)

DALLAS SNIPERS

Head coach: Aaron Davis

13-38-0, 4th place - Mid-Western Division

175 GF / 354 GA

DALLAS SPECIAL TEAMS

POWER PLAY 38/224 (17.0%, 17th in WSHL)

PENALTY KILL 55/191 (71.2%, 21st in WSHL - 9 SHG)

KEY PLAYERS

F Sterling Cooper (25-40-65), F Jaroslav Vasicek (26-33-59 in 41 GP), F Trevor Borlace

(15-18-33), F Christopher Mingus (9-9-18/45 PIM in 29 GP), D Arvidas Domeika (5-13-18/68 PIM), G Evan Williams (5-8-0/6.02/.869)

ANALYSIS

How dominant have the El Paso Rhinos been this season? If earning 99 of a possible 102 points during the regular season (49-1-1) was not enough to get the point across, consider this: El Paso has out-scored their opposition, 38-16, while playing shorthanded this season.

That is the challenge that the Dallas Snipers are up against in this series. There is only one way to approach a series like this if you are the underdog, and it seems like the Snipers have a healthy outlook on it.

"What do we have to lose?" Dallas head coach Aaron Davis asked rhetorically.

"Nothing. We are not supposed to beat them, but you play the game because you never know what might happen."

Davis said mid-week that he was still up in the air on which of his three goaltenders would be manning the crease for Friday night's Game One. That goalie will be tasked with facing down a team that scored 405 goals this season - just a shade under eight goals per game.

"I feel comfortable with all of my goalies," Davis said. "So, I will see Thursday who looks the best."

The amazing thing, when you look at the Rhinos stats sheet, is that nobody scored 100 points (although Jakob Kranabetter had 128 when you include his time with Valencia). Some WSHL teams have three players who each scored 100+ points this season but the Rhinos, as prolific as they are, spread their production around pretty well.

An amazing 14 players scored at a point-per-game clip or better, but only four potted 30 or more goals.

As if they needed a competitive advantage, El Paso has been able to get very comfortable at the Sierra Providence Events Center. Their last road game was February 18 at Wichita. They played their final six regular season games at home, have home ice for both rounds of the divisional playoffs, and will host the Thorne Cup Finals in April.

The Rhinos are not lacking motivation, however, as they have not won the division title in either of the last two seasons - the first time that has ever happened in back-to-back seasons in their history. They lost a semifinal series to Oklahoma City in 2016 and dropped the division final to eventual Thorne Cup champion Wichita a year ago.

--- *Scott Harrington/Harrington Sports Media*