

2018 THORNE CUP PREVIEW: OKLAHOMA CITY BLAZERS



Photo provided by: Mark Mauno

OKLAHOMA CITY BLAZERS

Head coach: Gary Gill

42-7-2, 1st place - Mid-Western Division

Mid-Western Division representative

HOW THEY GOT HERE

Earned a first-round bye

Defeated Springfield Express, 2 games to 0, in Mid-Western Division Semifinals

Lost to El Paso Rhinos, 2 games to 0, in Mid-Western Division Final

THORNE CUP SCHEDULE

Wednesday April 11; 2:00 pm vs. Idaho IceCats

Thursday April 12; 7:00 pm vs. El Paso Rhinos

Friday April 13; 2:00 pm vs. Ogden Mustangs

AGAINST THE FIELD (3-5-1)

vs. El Paso 1-4-1; three of last five decided by one goal - two in OT.

vs. Ogden 1-0-0; 3-2 win at showcase

vs. Utah 0-1-0; 3-0 loss at showcase
vs. Idaho 1-0-0; 2-1 win at showcase

Did not play Long Beach

THORNE CUP HISTORY

In their fourth season of existence, Oklahoma City is making their first appearance at the Thorne Cup.

OUTLOOK

Playing second fiddle to tournament host El Paso all season long will not matter, nor will losing the division final to the Rhinos, if the Oklahoma City Blazers can come up with the wins when they need it at the Thorne Cup Final.

The Blazers have beaten all three of the teams they will face in the round-robin - including El Paso - and have even given the Rhinos a few scares in some of the games they lost to them in January and in the playoffs. They arrive in El Paso secure in the knowledge that they can beat the teams standing between them and the Thorne Cup.

"We are playing the best teams in the WSHL," said head coach Gary Gill. "But we are a competitive team and have had success against the teams we will face in round robin play."

In addition to becoming battle-tested against the division rival Rhinos, OKC also posted wins over round-robin opponents Idaho and Ogden at the Western States Shootout in December. But, while his team knows it is capable of winning it all, they also know the intensity will be cranked up a notch and they will have to meet it.

"This is the playoffs, however," said Gill. "And it's a different kind of hockey now."

Quebec native Bobby Cloutier (30-7-2/2.18/.924) posted sterling numbers, and routinely played three games in three days during the regular season, so he is ready to carry the load again in El Paso despite being pulled after the first period of Game Two of the division final.

"Bobby was fine," Gill said. "It was a coaching decision to pull him from that game."

With the Rhinos already in place as the tournament hosts, the Blazers are slotted as the Mid-Western representatives for the tournament.

Ivan Bondarenko (61-65-126), Joshua Chamberlain (39-73-112) and Griffin Weincek (43-64-107) gave the Blazers three members in the century club, and if Chamberlain

had managed one more goal, OKC would have boasted four 40-goal scorers. Sniper Vitalii Mikhailov managed 42 in just 39 games played.

With a prolific offense at one end, Cloutier capable of being a game-changer at the other, and the experience of regular season wins over their competition, the Blazers are primed for a strong showing.

"You never know who will get hot and who will get cold," said Gill. "You have to play every game like it's your last game, because it just might be."

--- *Scott Harrington/Harrington Sports Media*