

THORNE CUP CHAMPIONSHIP GAME WRAP-UP; April 15, 2018



Photo provided by: El Paso Rhinos

The El Paso Rhinos completed their dramatic return from the brink of elimination and won the third Thorne Cup title in franchise history with a 3-2 win over the Ogden Mustangs in Sunday's Western States Hockey League championship game.

It was a fitting game for the final tilt of the WSHL's championship tournament. It was junior hockey at its best: two evenly-matched teams playing the game at a high level and being forced to work for every scoring chance against two goaltenders at the top of their games.

Late in the third period, with the game tied 2-2, Rhinos forward Nikita Pintusov created a turnover in the El Paso end and turned up ice with the puck. He carried it straight up the center of the ice on a three-on-two. As the Rhinos entered the Ogden zone, instead of dishing the puck to his left or right, Pintusov used a Mustangs defenseman as a screen and snapped a crisp wrist shot just under the bar over the glove hand of Ogden netminder Tymen Edelkoort. The goal came with 2:09 left in the game.

Rhinos goaltender Kayden Pickles (27 saves) started and won his third start in as many days days - all of them elimination games. He kept the Mustangs off the board until the final horn sounded.

Jacob Laurin put Ogden on the board 3:56 into the contest. It was the only goal of the opening period, and El Paso's Justin-Cole Dubecky provided the only scoring in the second period. Ogden

was pinned in their own end by an effective El Paso forecheck. The puck was played back to the point where Dubecky threw it on net. The puck went through a screen of bodies and sticks in front and directly into the net behind Edelkoort (26 saves).

The Rhinos took their first lead of the game 7:29 into the third period. The El Paso forecheck forced the Mustangs to fire the puck hard around the boards from behind their own net. Rhino forward Leeam Tivers was quick to the side boards, short-circuiting the play. Tivers took a few strides to the middle of the ice and beat Edelkoort with a hard, low wrist shot to make it 2-1 El Paso.

The elation among the El Paso fans lasted 11 seconds after the ensuing faceoff when Ogden's Tyson Liverance fired the puck on net from a severe angle along the right-wing boards. Pickles allowed a rebound and Mustang Sage Fleming out-dueled a Rhinos defenseman to get his stick on the puck first and swat it into the net and tie the game back up.

The score remained tied for the next 10 minutes until Pintusov's game-winner.

El Paso, which also won the WSHL championship in 2008 and 2014, hosted the six-team tournament at Sierra Providence Events Center.

The Rhinos lost their first two games in the round-robin, and trailed in their third game, but rallied to win, then defeated the five-time champion Idaho IceCats in the semifinals.

Appearing at the Thorne Cup for the third time, Ogden played in the championship game for the first time in their seven-year history.

--- *Scott Harrington/Harrington Sports Media*