

WSHL MID-WESTERN DIVISION NOTEBOOK - October 16, 2018



DALLAS SNIPERS (3-3-0, 8 pts.)

The Dallas Snipers didn't let a tough opening weekend discourage them. After being swept by defending Thorne Cup champion El Paso in their first series, the Snipers took down Cheyenne in three close games over the weekend.

The Snipers were able to sweep the series despite a 15-hour bus ride and a strong effort from the winless Stampede in all three contests.

Goaltender Kyle Plantz was one of the biggest reasons Dallas won the opening game despite being outshot by a 51-26 margin. Plantz put together his best performance of the young season and was rewarded with his first win.

Eighteen-year-old rookie forward Jasa Jenko is off to a hot start with seven points (3-4-7) over his first six appearances. The Slovenian is playing North American junior hockey for the first time and has been a welcome addition to head coach Aaron Davis' locker room.

Dallas is now slated to take on the Steamboat Wranglers for the first time this weekend. The three-game set will mark the beginning of the Snipers' six-game homestand at Dr. Pepper Star Center.

EL PASO RHINOS (3-0-0, 9 pts.)

The El Paso Rhinos are hungry for more after their opening-weekend sweep of Dallas. The Rhinos will be back in action this weekend for their first home series of the season, a three-game affair against visiting Wichita.

If this year is anything like last season, El Paso is in for a huge series. It dominated the Jr. Thunder en-route to a perfect 9-0-0 mark against them in 2017-18.

Obviously both clubs look different than they did last season, but El Paso likely has a mental edge heading into the series.

Goaltender Nils Velm is perfect through his first three appearances. The German netminder has stopped all 49 shots he has faced and looks to be another talented recruit from Rhinos Head Coach Cory Herman and Co.

El Paso is currently tied with Oklahoma City atop the Mid-Western Division through three games. The Rhinos will look to pull ahead this weekend in Wichita.

NORTHERN COLORADO EAGLES (2-3-0, 6 pts.)

While they have already shown they can play with the top teams in the WSHL, the Northern Colorado Eagles suffered a bit of a setback last weekend when they were swept by Ogden.

The sweep shouldn't be too much of a concern for Eagles fans. The Mustangs are one of the best teams in the league each year and each game was competitive.

While it certainly is way too early to be thinking about the postseason, Northern Colorado does not have to worry about Ogden in a potential divisional playoff matchup, as the Mustangs are in the WSHL's Mountain Division.

The Eagles have three players scoring at a point-per-game pace through their first six games in forwards Nikita Sheberov (3-4-7), Tyler Tromly (2-4-6) and Mark Revniaga (3-2-5), who has only appeared in five contests.

Established WSHL veteran Tom Ignatovich has yet to score through four games played. The 20-year-old has posted 76 points (31-45-76) over 89 WSHL appearances, though most of those points were collected over the last two seasons with the Seattle Totems.

After Northern Colorado acquired Ignatovich from Seattle last season, he put up eight points (2-6-8) in 12 games and an additional three points (1-2-3) over five playoff games.

Eagles fans are in for a treat this weekend when their team travels to Oklahoma City for a three-game set against the Blazers. It should be an exciting series between two evenly matched teams.

OKLAHOMA CITY BLAZERS (3-0-0, 9 pts.)

A quick start has put the Oklahoma City Blazers in a first-place tie in the Mid-Western Division.

Three consecutive wins over Casper by scores of 6-1, 3-1, and 8-4 allowed OKC to enjoy a nice head start on what it hopes is a run at the Mid-Western Division title.

The Blazers' leading scorer last year, Russian forward Vitali Mikhailov, continued where he left off with nine points (4-5-9) against Casper.

Mikhailov, 20, had a scoring line of 42-23-65 last season and has been a central cog in the Blazers' offense since joining the team in 2016.

Mikhailov's next game with OKC will be his 100th in the WSHL, and with 170 points (90-80-170) in the WSHL so far, he will likely become the 25th player in league history to score 200 points some time this season.

The next couple of weeks will pose an interesting challenge for OKC. The Blazers will put their undefeated record on the line this weekend when they battle Northern Colorado at home in a three-game series before taking on the Utah Outliers on the road next weekend.

The Outliers have won six of their first seven games and captured the Mountain Division crown last year before falling to Ogden in a division finals series. Utah also earned a bid in the Thorne Cup tournament and figures to once again be one of the WSHL's best teams.

WICHITA JR. THUNDER (0-0-0, 0 pts.)

The Wichita Jr. Thunder are the last team in the league to begin their 2018-19 schedule. The club will play the Steamboat Wranglers on the road this weekend before a tough road series against El Paso next week.

Wichita is scheduled to play its first nine games on the road. It's a difficult way to start the campaign, but the Jr. Thunder will be rewarded with a season-long 12-game homestand from mid-November through December 9.

In their six-year WSHL history, the Jr. Thunder have experienced all the ups and downs of a junior hockey club. After back-to-back last-place finishes in their division over the club's first two seasons, they began to show improvement by nearly doubling their win output in consecutive years.

Wichita's fourth year in the WSHL saw it finish third in the deep Mid-Western Division before getting hot at the end of the year and winning 11 straight games to claim its first Thorne Cup.

The Jr. Thunder are looking for a comeback under head coach Rob Weingartner, a former pro player with the Central Hockey League's Wichita Thunder. Hopefully, experience gained from last season will help several returning members of the Jr. Thunder lead a bounce-back campaign.

---Jared Tennant for Harrington Sports Media