

WSHL WEEKLY NOTES 01.15.19 – MID-WESTERN DIVISION



WSHL standings are expressed W-L-OTW-OTL (“W” and “L” represent regulation wins and losses; shootouts are included in overtime results). Three points are awarded for a regulation win, two for an overtime win and one for an overtime loss.

DALLAS SNIPERS (17-12-1-0, 53 pts.)

@DallasSnipers

For the second weekend in a row, the Dallas Snipers took two of three games from a Mountain Division opponent. The Snipers beat the Steamboat Wranglers on Friday and Saturday before falling 8-5 on Sunday in the series finale.

Last weekend, Dallas hosted the Cheyenne Stampede and dominated two of three games but allowed the lowly Stampede to pick up only their third regulation win of the season.

The Snipers are now tasked with taking on Oklahoma City in a three-game set on the road, starting Friday night at Arctic Edge Ice Arena. The Blazers have spent the majority of the year in the top spot in the Mid-Western Division after dominating their first-half schedule.

“We have to be prepared the same way for every game, every weekend, all year, no matter who it is,” said Snipers Head Coach Aaron Davis. “Although, you do have to look at different teams’ systems and structures and try to figure out ways to stop them.

“I know OKC will be a big test for us, especially with four of our guys at the World Juniors for one more week. This is a great opportunity for some guys to step up. As is the case with any series, taking care of the puck and limiting turnovers will be a huge decider in what happens in OKC.”

Dallas and OKC will be playing each other for the first time this season. The two clubs did not meet at all throughout the first few months of the campaign.

EL PASO RHINOS (21-7-3-2, 71 pts.)
@El_Paso_Rhinos

The El Paso Rhinos got off to the strong start to the new year they were looking for, winning two of three games on the road against Oklahoma City to maintain first place in the Mid-Western Division.

The Rhinos narrowly missed out on a series sweep. They posted a 5-2 victory in the opener before falling 2-1 in regulation and finally closing out the series with a dramatic 5-4 shootout win.

The 5-2 win was much closer than the final score would indicate. El Paso held a 3-1 lead late, but Oklahoma City scored to make it a one-goal game. The Rhinos netted a pair of goals in the final 2:18 of the game, including an empty-netter.

El Paso played well in the second game of the series, out-shooting the Blazers 44-25, but a strong effort from OKC netminder Bobby Cloutier allowed the Blazers to even the series at 1-1.

The Rhinos fell behind early in the series finale before managing to overcome a 3-1 deficit to take a 4-3 lead. The Blazers went on to tie the game and force overtime, but Jonas Burman and Martin Dubsy both scored in the ensuing shootout while Nils Velm stopped all four Blazers shooters.

The series was a preview of what seems to be a likely matchup in the Mid-Western Division final this spring. El Paso and Oklahoma City have battled for the first seed in

the division throughout the season and seem to be destined for a pivotal postseason series.

The Rhinos will take on Wichita on the road this weekend for three games. The last time those two clubs matched up, El Paso out-scored the Jr. Thunder 25-4 in a three-game sweep.

NORTHERN COLORADO EAGLES (18-12-0-2, 56 pts.)

@NoCoEagles

The Northern Colorado Eagles had their hands full against Wichita over the weekend, but the Eagles managed to pull off three consecutive wins and leapfrog Dallas for third place in the division.

Both of the first two games in the series were decided by a single goal, but Northern Colorado erupted for six goals in a shutout in the third and final contest.

Goaltender Marshall Murphy needed to make only 20 saves for his first shutout of the season. Murphy has had success in a workhorse role, posting a 2.66 goals-against average to go along with a .919 save percentage over 25 appearances.

Murphy's save percentage ranks in the top 10 among WSHL goaltenders. The 19-year-old Minnesota product has improved his numbers across the board compared to his performance last season with the Superior RoughRiders.

Northern Colorado hasn't been in the mix for the division title, but it could be on its way. The Eagles are 10 points behind Oklahoma City and 15 points back of division-leading El Paso.

Those deficits may seem large, but earning three points per regulation win means a hot stretch could push Northern Colorado toward the top of the division.

The Eagles will have some extra practice time with no games scheduled this weekend. Northern Colorado is back in action at home next weekend for a big series against Oklahoma City.

OKLAHOMA CITY BLAZERS (21-6-1-1, 66 pts.)

@OKCBlazersWSHL

The Oklahoma City Blazers provided some of the most entertaining hockey the WSHL has seen last weekend in their series against El Paso.

The rivalry between the Blazers and Rhinos is only beginning after El Paso won two of the three games in the series. The two clubs would no doubt relish the opportunity to meet in a Mid-Western Division Final series come playoff time.

One of OKC's trademarks this season has been dominant goaltending. Netminder Bobby Cloutier continued that trend in the second game against the Rhinos, as he willed the Blazers to victory by stopping 43 of 44 shots in a 2-1 win.

Cloutier (2.22/.936) leads the WSHL in save percentage, while Xavier Garneau (2.11/.931) is one of five goaltenders within .006 percentage points of Cloutier.

The Blazers have some important divisional games coming up, including series against Dallas and Northern Colorado over the next couple of weeks.

WICHITA JR. THUNDER (7-21-0-2, 23 pts.) @JrThunderHockey

It had to be a frustrating weekend for the Wichita Jr. Thunder, who did not pick up a point in the standings despite some hard-fought games against Northern Colorado.

In the first game, a 2-1 loss, an outstanding 47-save effort from Elis Ericson was wasted as Northern Colorado's go-ahead goal in the second period proved to be the difference.

Wichita held leads of 2-1 and 3-2 the following day, but the Eagles took the lead midway through the second period and neither club scored over the final 28:43 of the game.

The Jr. Thunder ran out of gas in a 6-0 loss in the series finale. It can be frustrating to lose games you seemingly had in your grasp, especially for a young team like Wichita, but the Jr. Thunder won't have much time to dwell on the series.

Wichita is getting ready to host El Paso for three games this weekend. The Jr. Thunder are a different team than the Rhinos saw when they dominated Wichita in late October, but it's going to take a special effort to take down a team like El Paso.

Forward Tyler Inlow has been the go-to option for the Jr. Thunder on offense. The Wichita native is just 18 years old but leads the club in goals and points (18-16-34).

Another Wichita native, forward Quinn O'Reilly, is putting together a great season at only 16 years old. O'Reilly has racked up 27 points (14-13-27) over 29 appearances

and had four goals and a pair of assists in a single game against Steamboat back on November 23.

---Jared Tennant for Harrington Sports Media