

WSHL WEEKLY NOTES 02.26.19 – 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 (21-22-1-1, 66 pts.)

@DallasSnipers

After getting their first week off since the onset of the second half, the Dallas Snipers will return to the ice this weekend with a road matchup against Northern Colorado, the team directly ahead of them in the Mid-Western Division standings.

The Snipers have hit a bit of a rough patch, dropping six straight games following a notable 7-5 victory over first-place El Paso on February 3.

“The next few weeks will be a good test for us,” said Snipers Head Coach Aaron Davis. “We need to get back to playing the way I know we can. It was good to have this past weekend off to regroup and get some rest.”

Barring a massive collapse from Northern Colorado, Dallas will take on Wichita in the play-in round of the Thorne Cup playoffs from March 14-17. The Snipers have posted a 7-4-0-1 record against the Jr. Thunder, but they've lost their last three matchups against Wichita.

The main difference between Dallas and Wichita is the talent found at the top of the Snipers roster. Players like Jasa Jenko (37-30-67), Eric Eaton (16-44-60), and Igor Litvenko (18-36-54) have been statistically better than anyone on the Jr. Thunder's roster.

Another area that separates Dallas from Wichita is the Snipers' power play unit, which is operating at a 21.3 percent clip. That puts the Snipers within the top 10 of the WSHL, and according to Davis it's an area that his team values.

"We work on the power play a few times a week," Davis explained. "Just running through a few different sets, depending on who we're facing. Special teams are a big part of hockey. You win games and you lose games on special teams."

EL PASO RHINOS (34-8-3-3, 111 pts.)

@El_Paso_Rhinos

In another great series between two top teams, the El Paso Rhinos claimed seven of nine possible points against Oklahoma City over the weekend and effectively wrapped up the top seed in the Mid-Western Division.

The Blazers are mathematically alive, but it would take an unlikely losing streak from the Rhinos in addition to a perfect performance from OKC in order for El Paso to lose out on the division crown.

El Paso appears to be as ready as it will ever be for the postseason. The Rhinos, who are three-time Thorne Cup champions, possess the depth scoring and stingy goaltending that has carried the franchise to the top of the league on more than one occasion over the last several years.

Led by 60-point scorers Jonas Burman (30-36-66) and Martin Dubsky (21-42-63), El Paso is a team that can generate offense from anywhere on the ice. All five skaters are a threat, as evidenced by ten 30-point scorers in addition to five 20-goal scorers found on the Rhinos' roster.

Goaltender Richie Parent (1.00/.961, 6 GP) hasn't been in the WSHL for long but opposing players have been unable to solve the 19-year-old.

If the current seeding of the Mid-Western Division stays the same come playoff time, which seems quite likely, El Paso will take on the winner of the Dallas-Wichita play-in series in the division semi-finals from March 21-24.

The Rhinos will get a preview of a potential first-round opponent next weekend when they host Wichita in a three-game set that will wrap up the regular season for both clubs.

NORTHERN COLORADO EAGLES (27-18-0-2, 83 pts.)
@NoCoEagles

After faltering in the series opener, the Northern Colorado Eagles posted back-to-back wins over Wichita to earn six of nine possible points last weekend.

The Eagles appear to have found a solid one-two punch between the pipes with workhorse veteran Marshall Murphy, who has a 2.70 goals-against average to go along with a .920 save percentage, and recently-added Bryce Crowley.

Crowley, a 1999 birth year, has won all three of his starts so far while recording a 2.00/.933 slash line. He stopped 28 of 30 shots on Sunday afternoon in an 11-2 victory over Wichita.

The Eagles will almost certainly take on Oklahoma City in a tough division semifinal draw when the Thorne Cup playoffs begin. Northern Colorado dropped six of eight games against the Blazers this season, but nearly every contest could have gone either way.

The Eagles have won five of their last six games and appear to be playing some of their better hockey of the season. Prior to mid-February, Northern Colorado had not registered double-digit goals in a single game. They've accomplished the feat four times over their last six contests.

Northern Colorado will wrap up its regular season schedule this weekend with a home series against Dallas, beginning on Friday night at Greeley Ice Haus.

OKLAHOMA CITY BLAZERS (31-10-2-1, 98 pts.)
@OKCBlazersWSHL

A hard-fought series didn't go the Oklahoma City Blazers way last weekend as the club picked up only two points against El Paso, losing plenty of ground on the Rhinos in the race for the Mid-Western Division title.

For the Blazers to have any shot at first place and an opening-round matchup with one of the bottom two clubs in the division, OKC needs to take each of its final six games and hope that Wichita pulls off the improbable and wins its series against El Paso next weekend.

Longtime Blazer Vitali Mikhailov has officially entered the top 10 on the WSHL's all-time scoring list with 130 goals and 126 assists for a total of 254 points over 164 games, 123 of which have been played with Oklahoma City.

Mikhailov's 130 goals rank second in league history, trailing only former Ogden Mustang Matus Spodniak's 135. Mikhailov has six games left to net six goals and take over as the WSHL's all-time leader in goal-scoring.

In addition to Mikhailov, OKC's fourth-ranked offense is led by Stephane Doering (28-42-70), Henrik Overvall (25-29-54), and Dominic Loubert (9-44-53). The Blazers' four 50-point scorers have netted nearly half of the team's 225 goals.

Following this weekend's three-game set against the Casper Bobcats at home, the Blazers will have their final test before the postseason with a road series in Dallas from March 8-10.

WICHITA JR. THUNDER (13-32-1-2, 43 pts.)
@JrThunderHockey

The Wichita Jr. Thunder lost their series against Northern Colorado, but they logged an impressive 4-3 road win over the Eagles last Friday.

Four different skaters scored for Wichita while forward Braeden Thomas dished out a pair of assists. In goal, Robert Allen stood on his head all night long in a 56-save effort en route to his second win of the year.

Allen, a Colorado native, has been with the Jr. Thunder since mid-February but has seen limited ice time. That's been changing in recent weeks as the 20-year-old has started three of Wichita's last four games, earning a pair of wins.

It appears as though the Jr. Thunder will take on Dallas in a best-of-three series from March 14-17 in the play-in round of the Thorne Cup playoffs.

That could be good news for Wichita, which swept the Snipers in a three-game series from February 8-10. A playoff series win would be icing on the cake for a Jr. Thunder squad that has seen notable progress in their rebuilding project following a 12-game losing streak to begin the season.

Wichita is off this week but will return to action next weekend with a difficult three-game series against division-leading El Paso, which will be looking to wrap up its second consecutive Mid-Western Division title.

---Jared Tennant for Harrington Sports Media