

MID-WESTERN DIVISION SEMIFINAL PREVIEW



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.

MID-WESTERN DIVISION PLAYOFFS – SEMI-FINAL ROUND

**4. DALLAS SNIPERS (22-26-1-2, 70 pts.) @
1. EL PASO RHINOS (37-8-3-3, 120 pts.)**

Best-of-three series; all games at County Events Center – El Paso, TX

GAME 1 Friday, March 22 7:00 p.m.

GAME 2 Saturday, March 23 7:00 p.m.

GAME 3 Sunday, March 24 4:30 p.m. (if necessary)

The top-seeded El Paso Rhinos will open their defense of last year's Thorne Cup championship with a semi-final matchup against the Dallas Snipers, who defeated the Wichita Jr. Thunder last weekend in a play-in series between the fourth and fifth place clubs in the Mid-Western Division. The Snipers, who were playing the Jr. Thunder in the postseason for the fourth time in the last five years, earned a pair of narrow wins to earn the right to take on the Rhinos.

"We stayed out of the box for the most part, and when we had to kill a few big penalties, we did," said Snipers Head Coach Aaron Davis. Davis' club will have their hands full this weekend against the Rhinos, a team that they dropped eight of nine games against throughout the regular season. The lone win came in the final matchup between the two teams on March 2 when two-goal outings from Hunter Best, Gasper Konc, and Karolis Krasilnikovas propelled the Snipers to a 7-5 victory over the Rhinos on home ice.

Unfortunately for Dallas, it won't have the advantage of playing at home for the remainder of the postseason. The Snipers will be tasked with a Rhinos team that has won 22 of its 25 home games and seems to have no mercy on opponents playing in their territory. In its most recent series at County Events Center, El Paso out-scored Wichita by a 37-4 margin and played a very physical brand of hockey. The Snipers can probably expect a similar type of effort, so there won't be any room for error.

"We just need to play hard for 60 minutes, no letdowns or lapses," Davis said. "I think the whole team has to be good. We can't have any passengers this weekend." The Rhinos have an extremely deep roster with a top-five offense that can produce goals from seemingly anywhere, so Davis' Snipers will have to be on top of their game at all times.

Rhinos forwards Jonas Burman (35-41-76) and Martin Dubsky (24-51-75) lead all scorers in the series, closely followed by Dallas' duo of Jasa Jenko (39-33-72) and Eric Eaton (18-48-66). El Paso has a total of seven 50-point scorers, including J.C. Dubecky (12-48-60) and John Erramouspe (29-31-60).

Dallas has a solid goaltending corps that features Alexander Aleshkin (3.18/.920), who has garnered most of the playing time, but El Paso's duo of Nils Velm and Richie Parent is arguably the best in the league. Parent has played as well as anyone in the WSHL since joining the Rhinos in early February, compiling a

miniscule 1.25 goals-against average to go along with a sparkling .948 save percentage. As a team, the Rhinos allow only 1.98 goals per game and have the second-best defense of any team in the WSHL.

**3. NORTHERN COLORADO EAGLES (28-19-1-2, 88 pts.) @
2. OKLAHOMA CITY BLAZERS (37-10-2-1, 116 pts.)**

Best-of-three series; all games at Arctic Edge Ice Arena – Oklahoma City, OK

GAME 1 Friday, March 22 8:00 p.m.

GAME 2 Saturday, March 23 7:30 p.m.

GAME 3 Sunday, March 24 2:50 p.m. (if necessary)

The Oklahoma City Blazers were in contention for the regular season division title until the final weekend of the season, but a series in which they grabbed only two of nine possible points against El Paso from February 22-24 ultimately sealed their fate. The Blazers will instead have to deal with the Northern Colorado Eagles, easily the best third-seed found in this year's WSHL postseason.

It wouldn't be a surprise to see a competitive, hard-fought series this weekend. Although OKC has taken six of eight games against Northern Colorado this season, the Eagles always seem to make things interesting. In their most recent matchup on January 27, multi-point efforts from Jacob Elik and Nikita Sheberov led to a 3-2 Eagles win. As a veteran-heavy team with nine players in their final year of eligibility, Northern Colorado will be looking to make an extended postseason run.

"As a group, we look at this as a new season," said Eagles Head Coach and General Manager Steve Haddon. "One key is being strong mentally through adversity and momentum swings that happen. The playoffs are an emotional and exciting time, and we need to keep focus on a shift-by-shift basis."

While 100-point scorer Vitali Mikhailov (49-57-106) will be Northern Colorado's main focus this weekend, the Blazers have a talented nucleus of offensive talent that features five 20-goal scorers and blueliner Dominic Loubert (9-54-63), who has racked up assists at a rapid pace throughout the year. Stephane Doering, a 20-year-old German with a 32-47-79 scoring line, is another Blazer to watch out for.

The Eagles use more of a committee approach, although Elik (15-43-58) and Mark Revniaga (22-32-54) both reached the 50-point milestone over the final weeks of

the regular season. Northern Colorado has a strong trio on the back end consisting of Zack Vanderwal (12-25-37), Trent Hines (12-24-36), and Michael Petrotto (8-26-34).

Special teams could be an influential factor throughout the series. The Blazers have the second-best power play unit in the WSHL, converting on an insane 29.2 percent of their opportunities. Their penalty kill is just as dominant, effectively holding off a league-best 91.3 percent of opposing power plays. The Blazers are also top five in the WSHL with 14 shorthanded goals. While the Eagles have posted respectable numbers (17.8 percent power play, 81.9 percent penalty kill), Haddon and his staff will probably be putting a heavy emphasis on special teams during this week's practice sessions.

Between the pipes, both clubs appear to be in good hands. Northern Colorado workhorse Marshall Murphy has accumulated a 2.66 goals-against average and a .921 save percentage while trailing only El Paso's Nils Velm in ice time. For the Blazers, Bobby Cloutier (2.38/.927) and Xavier Garneau (1.92/.929) provide two reliable options.

In order to pull off an upset, the Eagles will need to play strong defense while limiting the Blazers' effectiveness on special teams. Northern Colorado has shown a tendency to be involved in low-scoring defensive battles throughout the year. A defensive-minded series could play to the Eagles advantage this weekend in Oklahoma City.

---Jared Tennant for Harrington Sports Media