

MOUNTAIN 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.

4. STEAMBOAT WRANGLERS (8-40-1-2) @ 1. OGDEN MUSTANGS (47-2-0-2)

Best-of-three series; all games at The Ice Sheet

GAME 1 Friday, March 22 7:30 p.m.

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

GAME 3 Sunday, March 24 1:30 p.m. (if necessary)

The Ogden Mustangs ran away from the pack and hid a long time ago. They have had the best record, not just in the Mountain Division, but the entire WSHL wire to wire. Finally, this weekend, they get the post-season underway.

Ogden hosts the Steamboat Wranglers in a best-of-three Mountain Division Semifinal series at The Ice Sheet.

Mustangs head coach Jake Laime would like to see his team just keep doing what they have been doing all season as opposed to making any significant changes to their routine now that the playoffs have arrived.

In other words, If it 'aint broke...

“Nothing new in practice this week,” said Laime. “Just shorter and more pointed with focus on details.”

The Mustangs have all the confidence you would expect from a team that only lost four of 51 regular season games – and two of those in overtime. Ogden will worry about playing their game and let the other teams worry about game-planning for them.

“We are just trying to keep tracking and not reading in to anything or anyone,” Laime said. “We are just preparing the way we have all season with a little more detail down the stretch.”

The Mustangs can also play with the confidence of a team playing in front of one of the league’s best goaltenders. Artur Ogandzhanyan ranked at or near the top of the league in save percentage (.938, first), goals-against average (1.83, second) and wins (26, third-tied).

Offensively, Rhett Rampinelli and Ammon Anderson combined for 103 goals and 236 points during the regular season.

While the Wranglers lack any explosive weapons at that level, and may be over-matched in this series, they do have at least one thing going for them: A goalie – Jordan Belley – who is capable of stealing a game. That is exactly what he will have to do (twice) if Steamboat is going have any chance of advancing.

With a series win, the Mustangs will play in their sixth straight Mountain Division Final. The Wranglers, meanwhile, are making their Thorne Cup playoff debut.

Steamboat won the league championship in the final season of the Rocky Mountain Junior Hockey League a year ago, but came in fourth out of five teams in the Mountain Division in their inaugural WSHL season.

They will be facing an uphill battle against Ogden – as most teams would – but you have to start somewhere.

**3. CASPER BOBCATS (16-34-1-0) @
2. UTAH OUTLIERS (33-15-2-1)**

Best-of-three series; all games at Accord Ice Arena, West Valley City

GAME 1 Friday, March 22 7:30 p.m.

GAME 2 Saturday, March 23 6:30 p.m.

GAME 3 Sunday, March 24 12:00 p.m. (if necessary)

The Utah Outliers and Casper Bobcats will begin the post-season the same way they finished the regular season two weeks ago – with a (potentially) three-game series against one another.

How closely-matched are these two teams? It depends how you want to look at it. The Outliers and Bobcats were separated by just one position in the WSHL's Mountain Division standings, but Utah posted 18 more wins and accumulated 54 more points.

The Outliers also swept all nine regular season meetings between these two teams. That includes the three games in Casper two weeks ago in which they out-scored the Bobcats 21-2.

Utah is in the playoffs for the sixth consecutive season, but made the division final for the first time just a year ago. They lost to Ogden in two games in that series and are hoping to get a chance at exacting revenge this year.

The first step, however, is getting past Casper.

Utah posted a +163 goal differential over the course of the regular season while Casper checked in at -111. The Outliers boast six 20-goal scorers while Casper can only claim two.

Bobcats head coach John Ambrefe knows the deck is stacked against his club, but he also knows what they have to do to give themselves a chance to win.

“We have to play with passion and pride,” he said. “The last series we played too passive and you cannot compete if you don't play with some edge.”

Casper will also be healthier for this series and that should help, too.

“We played with 12 players all weekend due to injuries, but will have 19 skaters this coming series,” said Ambrefe. “If we play our game we should be in good shape.”

If the Bobcats do generate scoring opportunities, they still have to beat Utah goaltender Oscar Wahlgren who posted a stellar 2.02 goals-against average and .917 save percentage while posting a 21-9-1 record.

Casper can answer with any one of three viable options in goal, but Ambrefe has tagged Ludwig Nordqvist as his Game One starter.

The Bobcats are a new franchise – not a continuation of the Casper Coyotes – so this is their first Thorne Cup playoff series. The Coyotes, for what it is worth, won a playoff series in each of their first three years in the league (2015-2017) before going out in the division quarterfinal last year.

--- Compiled by Scott Harrington for Harrington Sports Media