

WSHL WEEKLY NOTES 03.12.19 – 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.

MID-WESTERN DIVISION PLAYOFFS – FIRST ROUND

5. WICHITA JR. THUNDER (13-35-1-2, 43 pts.) @

4. DALLAS SNIPERS (22-26-1-2, 70 pts.)

Best-of-three series; all games at Dr. Pepper Star Center – Plano, TX

GAME 1 Friday, March 15 6:45 p.m.

GAME 2 Saturday, March 16 6:45 p.m.

GAME 3 Sunday, March 17 12:00 p.m. (if necessary)

On paper, it appears as though the Dallas Snipers will have the clear upper hand as they head into this weekend's play-in series against the fifth-place Wichita Jr. Thunder. Dallas finished the regular season with 27 more points than Wichita and has a trio of talented scorers in Jasa Jenko (39-33-72), Eric Eaton (18-48-66), and Igor Litvinenko (20-39-59) who have put up better numbers than anyone on the Jr. Thunder's roster.

A closer look reveals that Wichita will present a difficult matchup for Dallas. The Jr. Thunder swept the Snipers in a three-game series from February 8-10 with all three wins coming by a single goal. On the year, Dallas posted a 7-4-0-1 record against Wichita, but the Jr. Thunder have won three of the last four contests. According to Wichita Head Coach Rob Weingartner, health could be one of the deciding factors in this series.

"The biggest issue we will face will be getting guys healthy in time for Friday," Weingartner said. "We had eight players sit out due to injuries sustained in El Paso this weekend."

The series he's referring to saw nothing go right for the Jr. Thunder as they were easily handled by an El Paso club that's eyeing its second straight Thorne Cup. Wichita was out-scored 37-4 in the three-game road series in a hostile environment. Right now, the most important thing for the Jr. Thunder is to rest up and hopefully have most if not all of their eight 20-point scorers ready for this weekend.

Dallas is coming off a three-game sweep at the hands of Oklahoma City, the second seed in the Mid-Western Division. Two of the losses were by only two goals, but the Snipers expect a better effort this weekend on home ice.

"We have to play 60 minutes every game," said Snipers Head Coach Aaron Davis. "Last weekend, we played five out of nine periods. If we want any chance to move on, we have to be committed to playing 60 minutes. Our top guys have to be our best players at both ends of the ice. Two of our top three scorers are 1998 birth years, so I expect them to be very engaged."

Eaton and Litvinenko are both in their final year of eligibility and will be hungry for postseason success. Eaton is in his third year with the Snipers and has yet to experience a playoff win. As a rookie in the 2016-17 season, Eaton's Snipers were

swept by the Jr. Thunder as Wichita began its journey to its first and only Thorne Cup championship.

Davis pointed towards special teams as an area to watch throughout this weekend's series. The Snipers have excelled on the power play, converting on 20 percent of their opportunities. To their credit, the Jr. Thunder have been more than respectable on the man advantage, scoring at a 17.4 percent clip. Neither club has been great on the penalty kill, but Wichita has struggled tremendously. The Jr. Thunder are killing off only 64.3 percent of opposing power plays, by far the lowest mark in the WSHL.

EL PASO RHINOS (37-8-3-3, 120 pts.)

@El_Paso_Rhinos

The El Paso Rhinos completed their final tune-up before the playoffs last weekend with a dominant three-game sweep of Wichita, giving them their straight regular season division title and 12th in franchise history.

The Rhinos will have a couple of weeks to prepare for their division semi-final series against the winner of the Wichita-Dallas matchup. El Paso figures to be a heavy favorite against either club.

Unlike other top WSHL teams, the Rhinos don't have one or two players who they rely on for the bulk of their scoring. Instead, El Paso has built up an extremely deep roster that's led by 70-point scorers Jonas Burman (35-41-76) and Martin Dubsky (24-50-74).

Seven of the Rhinos' top eight scorers are playing in their final seasons of eligibility, which is sure to provide some extra motivation in El Paso's quest for back-to-back championships.

El Paso will end the regular season with a crazy plus-183 goal differential, second-best in the league behind the Ogden Mustangs' plus-255. The Mustangs are also the only WSHL club to allow less goals than the Rhinos.

El Paso will be looking to red-hot Richie Parent and 30-game-winner Nils Velm to carry the load in net. Both players are among the league's top goaltenders and will give the Rhinos a fighting chance against any offense in the WSHL.

NORTHERN COLORADO EAGLES (28-19-1-2, 88 pts.)

@NoCoEagles

The Northern Colorado Eagles began a three-week break last weekend after closing out their regular season schedule by taking two of three games against Dallas on home ice.

The Eagles appear to be playing some of their better hockey of the year and have won seven of their last nine games, including four games with double-digit goals.

Goaltender Marshall Murphy will likely draw the majority of playing time when Northern Colorado travels to Arctic Edge Ice Arena from March 22-24 for a best-of-three playoff series against Oklahoma City.

Murphy, 20, has been one of the best workhorse goalies in the league. He has posted a 2.66/.921 slash line while garnering the second-most ice time and facing the third-most shots of any WSHL netminder.

Furthermore, Murphy has had some outstanding performances against the Blazers throughout the year. He has a .924 save percentage against OKC and has carried the Eagles to victory over the Blazers on multiple occasions, including a game in which he stopped 52 of 54 shots in a 3-2 Northern Colorado win on December 15.

OKLAHOMA CITY BLAZERS (37-10-2-1, 116 pts.)

@OKCBlazersWSHL

The Oklahoma City Blazers did their part with three consecutive wins over Dallas, but they missed out on the division crown after El Paso took care of business against Wichita.

The Blazers ultimately fell four points shy of the Rhinos. Luckily for Oklahoma City, regular season accolades don't mean much when they playoffs roll around, although the Blazers definitely would have benefitted from home ice advantage in a potential division final series against El Paso.

OKC will have to settle for a division semi-final series against Northern Colorado from March 22-24 in front of their hometown fans.

The matchup appears to favor the Blazers as Oklahoma City won six times during the eight-game season series between the two teams. The Eagles took the most recent contest, though, claiming a 3-2 victory on January 27.

After scoring a pair of goals in the final game of the regular season, forward Vitali Mikhailov tied Ogden's Matus Spodniak for most goals in WSHL history with 135. Mikhailov will finish the year as the Blazers' lone 100-point scorer with a 49-57-106 line, putting him just outside the top five in the league scoring race.

Despite coming up just short of holding sole possession of the top spot on the WSHL's all-time goal-scoring list, Mikhailov would likely prefer his first Thorne Cup title to any individual accomplishments.

---Jared Tennant for Harrington Sports Media