

2019 Thorne Cup Preview



Only two of the six franchises descending on The Ice Sheet in Ogden, UT for this year's Thorne Cup tournament have hoisted the Western States Hockey League's championship hardware before. The El Paso Rhinos won their third championship a year ago as the host team. None of the Rhinos players had been born yet when the Long Beach Bombers franchise – the oldest in the WSHL – claimed the first two league championships in 1995 and 1996 as the Anaheim Jr. Ducks.

None of the other four teams – including the host Ogden Mustangs, who only lost two games in regulation all season – have ever hoisted The Cup. That makes for pretty good odds that some team will claim their first championship this year, but the Rhinos will certainly have something to say about that.

Each of the six participating teams will play three preliminary round games Tuesday through Thursday, and the top four teams will advance to the single-elimination playoff round culminating with Saturday night's championship game.

TEAM-BY-TEAM PREVIEWS:

OGDEN MUSTANGS (#1 seed)

Head coach: Jake Laime

47-2-0-2, 1st – Mountain Division

Regular season division titles: 2 (2016-17, 2018-19)

Thorne Cup championships: 0

DIVISIONAL PLAYOFFS

Defeated Steamboat Wranglers (10-1, 15-0)

Defeated Utah Outliers (2-1 OT, 1-2, 2-1 2OT)

THORNE CUP ROUND ROBIN SCHEDULE

Tuesday, April 9, 7:30 p.m. Oklahoma City Blazers

Wednesday, April 10, 7:30 p.m. Edson Aeros

Thursday, April 11, 7:30 p.m. El Paso Rhinos

MUSTANGS PREVIEW

The Ogden Mustangs are the top seed for the 2019 Thorne Cup based on their domination of the WSHL regular season and they are also this year's host team. It is fair to label them as the favorites heading into the tournament having lost just two games in regulation time all season.

Despite the strong statistical argument that can be made for the Mustangs as the best team in the league, there are two points that show they are beatable: their mid-November series at Oklahoma City and the Mountain Division Final.

The Mustangs lost two of three games against the Blazers in OKC and barely slipped past the Utah Outliers in the division final.

Ogden, interestingly enough, opens round robin play with a 7:30 p.m. tilt with Oklahoma City on Tuesday.

The Mustangs had a close call in the Mountain Division Final against a desperate Utah team that needed to win to extend their season. The Outliers took Ogden deep into a second overtime in Game Three before Jake Laime and crew claimed their second division playoff championship on a goal by Kerry Kruzel. They also needed an OT goal from Oliver Wieringa to win Game One of that series.

You can look at the Mustangs' round-robin slate and say it's a tough draw but there is no avoiding elite competition at this stage of the season. The team that wins the

Thorne Cup will have to win while playing their fourth and fifth games in as many days against the best the league has to offer.

With a pair of 100-point scorers in Rhett Rampinelli (58-74-132) and Ammon Anderson (45-59-104), five more players with 20+ goals, a veteran defense, and a dominant #1 goalie between the pipes with Artur Ogandzhanyan (26-1-2, 1.83, .938), the Mustangs are clearly built to win this year but the slate is wiped clean for the six teams still standing.

EDSON AEROS (#2 seed)

Head coach: Bernie Lynch

37-6-1-1, 1st – Provincial Division

Regular season division titles: 1 (2018-19)

Thorne Cup championships: 0

DIVISIONAL PLAYOFFS

Defeated Cold Lake Wings (16-1, 6-2)

Defeated Hinton Wildcats (5-2, 5-3)

THORNE CUP ROUND ROBIN SCHEDULE

Tuesday, April 9, 3:00 p.m. Long Beach Bombers

Wednesday, April 10, 7:30 p.m. Ogden Mustangs

Thursday, April 11, 3:00 p.m. Bellingham Blazers

AEROS PREVIEW

The last time the Edson Aeros had the opportunity to venture south of the border and take on elite competition from around the WSHL was just before Christmas at the Western States Shootout in Las Vegas.

The Aeros went 0-3-0 at that event, with two of their losses coming against teams on their Thorne Cup Preliminary Round docket: Long Beach and Ogden.

The results of that mid-season showcase were not great, but Edson head coach Bernie Lynch is looking forward to seeing his team test itself against the top teams in the league again here at the end of the season.

“We were a very inexperienced team in Vegas with one line,” said Lynch. “We’re better now and our team is always game for a challenge.”

The Aeros were the most prolific offensive team in the league, scoring over seven goals per game through the regular season.

Three forwards were primarily responsible for the buckets of goals scored in Edson this year: Sebastian Heden (62-86-148), Emil Johansson (76-65-141) and Kevin Lundin (38-62-100). The offense drops off after those three, but that does not mean the Aeros will lean on them exclusively to go out and win the title for them.

“We are a team – not one line,” Lynch asserted. “Everybody has a role and we'll try our best.”

The Aeros may go as far as their top line – and starting goalie Liam Austin – takes them. Austin (26-5-0, 2.66, .922) is the kind of goalie that gives his team a chance to win every time he gets the starting nod, but the same goes for most of the teams here, so he has to be at his best.

The Aeros may be at a disadvantage if they qualify for the semifinals. Playing in the four-team Provincial Division, the WSHL's Canadian teams generally played two games per week – Friday and Saturday – as opposed to the three-in-threes that are so customary around the rest of the league.

“I'm not concerned about fatigue,” Lynch said.

The Thorne Cup is a grueling event that sees the finalists play five times in as many days with the stakes getting higher for each game. Every team's endurance is tested.

But first things first. Edson opens up with two teams that bested them at the showcase – Long Beach and Ogden – and they now have an opportunity to show how far they have come in the second half, and to do it on the league's biggest stage.

LONG BEACH BOMBERS (#3 seed)

Head coach: Chris White

35-8-6-2, 1st – Western Division

Regular season division titles: 3 (2016-17, 2017-18, 2018-19)

Thorne Cup championships: 2 (1995, 1996)

DIVISIONAL PLAYOFFS

Defeated Ontario Avalanche (6-1, 4-0)

Defeated Fresno Monsters (4-3, 2-3, 7-0)

THORNE CUP ROUND ROBIN SCHEDULE

Tuesday, April 9, 3:00 p.m. Edson Aeros

Wednesday, April 10, 3:00 p.m. El Paso Rhinos

Thursday, April 11, 11:00 a.m. Oklahoma City Blazers

BOMBERS PREVIEW

The Long Beach Bombers head to Ogden for their third straight Thorne Cup appearance this week. Is the third time the charm for head coach Chris White and his charges?

“We'll see,” said White. “We're confident in our squad.”

Having been through it before, White knows the importance of a strong start in what is a grueling tournament format.

“Game One is huge – you don't want to be chasing the leaders, on Days Two and Three,” said White. “Nobody wants to be needing help from anyone else, so it's important to start the Round Robin segment with a win.”

As the Bombers look at their three-game round robin slate they see two teams they faced off against in the Western States Shootout in December: The Edson Aeros and Oklahoma City Blazers.

“Edson has been steam-rolling through the second half of the season,” White said. “But we're familiar with them and we need to focus on our game in order to beat anyone this week.”

The Bombers boast a team that has a nice formula for winning a tournament like this: High-end skill, depth and a top-notch veteran goaltender.

When it comes to the goaltending, Long Beach has benefited from having a steady veteran hand between the pipes in Domenic Bosetti (28-5-2, 2.34, .933). The 20-year-old started all five games in the Bombers' Western Division playoff run, but can any team rely on one goalie to start the five games in five days that it will take to claim the Thorne Cup?

“It would be great if you could do that but I don't think it's realistic,” White said when asked if he would plan out his starting goaltenders ahead of time for the five-day event. “You need to go in and take it day-by-day, and make decisions and adjustments as you go.”

The Bombers franchise claimed the first two WSHL championships in 1995 & 1996 as the Anaheim Jr. Ducks. White and the Bombers are looking forward to claiming the team's first championship of the WSHL's "Modern Era".

"It's going to be a long week of hockey," he said. "The eventual winner is going to need to be extremely focused on the task at-hand, and probably get a few bounces, along the way."

EL PASO RHINOS (#4 seed)

Head coach: Cory Herman

37-8-3-3, 1st – Mid-Western Division

Regular season division titles: 12 (2006-07, 2007-08, 2008-09, 2009-10, 2010-11, 2011-12, 2012-13, 2013-14, 2014-15, 2016-17, 2017-18, 2018-19)

Thorne cup championships: 3 (2008, 2014, 2018)

DIVISIONAL PLAYOFFS

Defeated Dallas Snipers (11-0, 3-0)

Defeated Oklahoma City Blazers (3-2 OT, 6-0)

THORNE CUP ROUND ROBIN SCHEDULE

Tuesday, April 9, 11:00 a.m. Bellingham Blazers

Wednesday, April 10, 3:00 p.m. Long Beach Bombers

Thursday, April 11, 7:30 p.m. Ogden Mustangs

RHINOS PREVIEW

They may not be the favorites going into this year's tournament, but the Thorne Cup belongs to the El Paso Rhinos until somebody takes it from them.

Circle your calendars for the final game of the round-robin stage of the tournament: Thursday at 7:30 p.m. Last year's hosts and champions go up against this year's hosts as the Rhinos and Ogden Mustangs face off. If either team has failed to clinch a semifinal spot going into that game it will be an intense tilt.

Prolific point-producing defenseman Justin-Cole Dubecky (136 points in 99 career games) and two-time 20-goal forward Adam Stalzer are the only two players on the roster who were a part of last year's Thorne Cup championship, but El Paso general manager and head coach Cory Herman has certainly seen it all in the WSHL. His teams have finished atop their division 12 of 13 years and won Thorne Cups in 2008, 2014 and 2018. Having his steady hand at the helm with certainly have the Rhinos prepared for any scenario they encounter this week in Ogden.

The Rhinos do not have the prolific scorers at the top of their lineup that they have boasted in past seasons, with only Jonas Burman (35-41-76) and Martin Dubsky (24-51-75) hitting the 75-point mark, but they boast nine other players with 30+ points, so the offense can come from anywhere and that makes them tough to match up against.

In net, Nils Velm led the WSHL with 31 wins (31-5-3) and a 1.73 goals-against average. His .922 save percentage also placed him among the league leaders, but Richie Parent joined the team from the Shreveport Mudbugs (NAHL) late in the season and has started some key games.

Parent started Game One in both rounds of the Mountain Division playoffs, so it will be interesting to see who is between the pipes when the Rhinos take the ice against Bellingham Tuesday morning for the tournament opener.

BELLINGHAM BLAZERS (#5 seed)

Head coach: Erick Ruud

34-14-0-3, 2nd – Northwest Division

Regular season division titles: 0

Thorne cup championships: 0

DIVISIONAL PLAYOFFS

Defeated Southern Oregon Spartans (5-2, 10-6)

Defeated Seattle Totems (2-5, 5-4 OT, 2-0)

THORNE CUP ROUND ROBIN SCHEDULE

Tuesday, April 9, 11:00 a.m. El Paso Rhinos

Wednesday, April 10, 11:00 a.m. Oklahoma City Blazers

Thursday, April 11, 3:00 p.m. Edson Aeros

BELLINGHAM BLAZERS PREVIEW

The Bellingham Blazers took an unconventional path to the Thorne Cup.

Consider the following:

First, Bellingham, which led the Northwest Division standings almost wire-to-wire, allowed the Seattle Totems to snatch the regular season division title from them on the final day of the regular season.

Then, the Blazers replaced head coach Mark Collins with assistant Erick Ruud during the week leading up to their division semifinal series against the Southern Oregon Spartans.

Bellingham won on home ice against Southern Oregon, advancing to get a shot at exacting revenge on the rival Totems the following week. They dropped Game One by a score of 5-2, leaving them with the task of winning two straight at home.

An overtime win in Game Two was followed by a 41-save shutout by Edward Coffey in a 2-0 win in the Game Three clincher.

“Of course, it felt great to go into Seattle and take the division title back to Bellingham after letting the regular season title slip away,” Ruud admitted. “Seattle had our number all year but the team worked hard and really came together to win the division.”

You could make an argument that Bellingham should just be happy to be here, but that makes them that much more dangerous. They are, in reality, a legit team that earned their way to Ogden and a shot at the Thorne Cup that is also a loose team feeling no pressure.

Any team with that mindset – and three 40-goal scorers – is not an easy opponent to defeat.

The Blazers boast snipers Timothy Prexler (41-80-121), Jamahl Eakett (50-64-114) and Thomas Steven (52-31-83) to go along with playmaker Robbie Eichelberger (19-60-79) and a pair of goaltenders who have shown they can come up big at the most critical moments.

“Those guys are important to our offense,” said Ruud. “But to win games in the Thorne cup you need all 23 guys playing at the highest level possible to win.”

Coffey is a 6’6” target that has won all three of his post-season assignments – including winning Games Two and Three in Seattle with Bellingham’s backs to the wall.

You would think Ruud would tab Coffey as the Game One starter for the round-robin, but Kolter Pawlick had better numbers in the regular season and, actually, played more often than Coffey.

“Coffey played great and helped us win the division title,” said Ruud. “But, at this point, I haven't made a decision on who's starting Game One. We have three very good goalies so it's always a tough decision.”

Ruud's head must be spinning from the last few weeks, and he'll find himself going up against some very accomplished WSHL coaches this week, but the Blazers have already come through in a situation in the divisional playoffs where they had to win back-to-back must-win games just to get to Ogden for the WSHL's Big Dance. Proving that resilience to themselves is something that is invaluable to a team at this time of year.

“That's going to be very important going into the tournament where pretty much every game is a must win,” Ruud said of comeback experience. “Right now, we have a lot of confidence and we are ready to prove ourselves to the league.”

OKLAHOMA CITY BLAZERS (#6 seed)

Head coach: Gary Gill

37-10-2-1, 2nd – Mid-Western Division

Regular season division titles: 1 (2015-16)

Thorne cup championships: 0

DIVISIONAL PLAYOFFS

Defeated Northern Colorado Eagles (2-3, 3-2, 5-1)

Lost to El Paso Rhinos (2-3 OT, 0-6)

Qualified for Thorne Cup as wildcard

THORNE CUP ROUND ROBIN SCHEDULE

Tuesday, April 9, 7:30 p.m. Ogden Mustangs

Wednesday, April 10, 11:00 a.m. Bellingham Blazers

Thursday, April 11, 11:00 a.m. Long Beach Bombers

OKLAHOMA CITY BLAZERS PREVIEW

Don't be fooled by the “Wildcard” tag on the Oklahoma City Blazers. They have as good a shot at bringing home the Thorne Cup as any other team in Ogden this week. They accumulated the fourth-most points in the WSHL overall, finishing a close second to El Paso in both the regular season and playoffs in the Mid-Western Division.

Three of OKC's five Mid-Western Division playoff games were decided by a single goal – one of them in overtime. The Blazers come into the tournament a battle-tested group.

They also hosted the Ogden Mustangs in Oklahoma City November 16-18 and beat them, not once, but twice. Even the game they lost was only by one goal. They know they can play with the Mustangs and the Rhinos and also defeated Bellingham at the Western States Shootout. They lost to Long Beach by a single goal at that same event.

They got a look at all three of their round-robin opponents in the regular season.

A hot goalie is a key ingredient to just about any championship-winning hockey team and the Blazers have Bobby Cloutier with the hot hand. Dating back from his last regular season start vs. El Paso through Game One of division final, Cloutier boasted a 4-1-1 record with a 1.83 goals-against average and .943 save percentage.

Xavier Garneau also gave Oklahoma City fantastic goaltending during the year, but it is hard to imagine Blazers head coach Gary Gill not tapping Cloutier as the starter for the round-robin opener against Ogden on Tuesday evening.

The Blazers are a veteran team built to win this year. They boast five 20-goal scorers (Jordan Sgro scored 19), led by Vitalii Mikhailov's 49. Mikhailov hit the 40-goal plateau for the second straight season in a Blazers sweater and has produced 227 points over three seasons in OKC.

If they can replicate their regular season success against the Mustangs on Tuesday, they will go a long way towards securing a semifinal spot. If they come up short, they will have to get things back on track against Bellingham in the early (11:00 a.m.) game on Wednesday, leaving them with a quick turnaround.

2019 THORNE CUP STANDINGS

regulation wins-regulation losses-OT wins-OT losses (points)

1. Ogden Mustangs 0-0-0-0 (0)
2. Edson Aeros 0-0-0-0 (0)
3. Long Beach Bombers 0-0-0-0 (0)
4. El Paso Rhinos 0-0-0-0 (0)
5. Bellingham Blazers 0-0-0-0 (0)
6. Oklahoma City Blazers 0-0-0-0 (0)

TIE-BREAKERS: If two teams are tied at the end of the round-robin, head-to-head competition at the Thorne Cup is the first tie breaker. If the two teams did not play each other, then the team with the highest ranking entering the Thorne Cup shall advance or take the highest position available. In a three-way tie, teams will be ranked by their pre-tournament seeding.

--- Scott Harrington for Harrington Sports Media