

WSHL 2019 DIVISION FINALS PREVIEW



The Thorne Cup tournament is a six-team event. All five division playoff champions will qualify. If Thorne Cup host Ogden wins the Mountain Division championship, the 6th team will be the division runner-up with the highest win percentage. If Utah defeats Ogden, Utah goes in as the Mountain Division champ and Ogden fills the 6th slot as the host team. Win percentages (regulation wins + OT wins)/GP are listed in () in the match-ups below. For more detail on the WSHL post-season, including a Wild Card Selection Table, go here:

<http://www.wshl.org/news/divisional-playoffs/thorne-cup>

MID-WESTERN DIVISION:

MW2. OKLAHOMA CITY BLAZERS (.765) @ MW1. EL PASO RHINOS (.784)

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

GAME 1 - Friday, March 29 - 7:00 p.m.

GAME 2 - Saturday, March 30 - 7:00 p.m.

GAME 3 - Sunday, March 31 - 4:30 p.m. (if necessary)

This series should be a classic. It pits two of the top five teams in the league by winning percentage against each other.

The El Paso Rhinos won five of nine games in the regular season series against the rival Oklahoma City Blazers. Five of the nine games were decided by one goal with a shootout win for the Rhinos and an OT win for the Blazers.

Both teams won 37 games in regulation with the Rhinos taking the division with 120 points to OKC's 116. The loser in this series stands a pretty good chance of getting the wildcard spot if Ogden wins the Mountain Division but, with both teams eyeing a legit shot at the Thorne Cup, they are not going to want to leave anything to chance.

Winning on the ice this weekend is the only way to assure a spot in Ogden for the Big Dance next month.

The Rhinos finished first in the Mid-Western division for the 12th time in 13 years and find themselves in the division final for the 12th time as well.

The El Paso offense lacks the star power of recent years. Top scorers Jonas Burman (35-41-76) and Martin Dubsy (24-51-75) are excellent players but neither came close to 100 points. As a team, the Rhinos dropped from 405 goals to 284.

El Paso still boasts enviable scoring depth. With a half-dozen 20-goal scorers, the Rhinos are a deep, well-balanced, team offensively. Justin-Cole Dubecky (12-48-60) and Donald Alchin (8-46-54) anchor the El Paso "D" in front of Nils Velm (31-5-3, 1.73, .922) and Richie Parent (4-0-0, 1.25, .948 in four starts).

Velm's 31 wins led the entire WSHL.

Oklahoma City's Vitalii Mikhailov (49-58-107) tied the WSHL's career goal-scoring record (135) late in the regular season and was the Game Two hero against Northern Colorado in the division semifinal, scoring the game-winner with 7.5 seconds left.

The Blazers having their backs put against the wall in the last round could pay dividends moving forward as the team knows they can rally from a game down and come up with big goals when they need them.

"I believe any time you face elimination it can light a fire," said Blazers head coach Gary Gill. "It was great to see the heart – and the never-say-die attitude – that this team has."

Oklahoma City has depth in goal with Bobby Cloutier (2.33, .929) and Xavier Garneau (1.92, .929), but Cloutier played all three games in the division semifinal win over NoCo, stopping 43 of 46 shots (.935) in Games Two and Three with OKC facing elimination. Still, Gill stopped short of naming the Quebec native as his Game One starter for Friday.

“Me and the staff will make game-day decisions,” Gill said in reference to his goaltending. “We have solid options so you never know who will be in net for us.”

There is an excellent chance that both of these teams will qualify for the Thorne Cup as the losing team could very well have the best record among the five division runners-up. If one of Ogden, Edson or Long Beach loses their series that changes things, however.

WESTERN DIVISION:

W2. FRESNO MONSTERS (.667) @ W1. LONG BEACH BOMBERS (.804)

Best-of-three series; all games at The Rinks – Lakewood (Long Beach)

GAME 1 - Thursday March 28 - 7:45 p.m. Thursday

GAME 2 - Friday, March 29 - 7:45 p.m. Friday

GAME 3 - Saturday, March 30 - 6:30 p.m. Saturday (if necessary)

This will be the sixth straight year that either the Long Beach Bombers or the Fresno Monsters will win the Western Division playoff championship. Should the Bombers prevail it will be their fourth in a row.

Both teams swept their semifinal series, with Long Beach ousting Ontario (6-1, 4-0) and Fresno eliminating San Diego (5-2, 6-1).

The Bombers and Monsters met in a pair of three-game series early in the regular season with Long Beach winning two of three games both times.

“It gives us confidence with winning three against them,” said Fresno head coach Kevin Kaminski. “We know we need to play a solid road game and keep things tight and capitalize on our chances.”

The rivals also met in a seventh game in mid-January, with Fresno winning in a shootout, but that is the last time they have seen each other in person. The

Monsters have not changed their roster drastically since then, so Long Beach general manager and head coach Chris White feels the Bombers have a pretty good handle on what the Monsters will throw at them.

“Their personnel and makeup are very similar to when we last played them,” said White. “But, of course, we have been keeping an eye on their games with anticipation of this match-up.”

Tomas Urbanec led the Bombers with 41 goals during the season and has lit the lamp in the last six games, scoring 10 goals in that span. That includes shorthanded goals in each of the two games against Ontario in the division semis.

It won't matter how many chances Fresno can generate if Domenic Bosetti plays the way he did in the Long Beach crease last week. Bosetti stopped 67 of 68 shots (.985 SV%) in the semifinal sweep of the Avalanche.

“It's no secret we need traffic all night,” said Kaminski. “We need to make it miserable on Bosetti and get pucks to the net and compete for second chances with our second effort.”

Tyler Mathews emerged as Fresno's #1 goalie in the second half and solidified that with a solid showing in both games against San Diego in the last round, stopping 48 of 51 shots (.941). You can expect to see him between the pipes for Game One Thursday night.

Three different Bombers produced more points than Fresno's leading scorer Petr Philippov (33-42-75), but 10 Monsters hit double-digits in goals, so they have a balanced, deep attack.

“Philippov has had a very strong season, and he can make you pay if you get caught puck-watching,” said White. “Velazquez is an offensive threat, as well as Danaev. Beyond that, they have a solid, hard-working group that thrives on energy and momentum. When they get rolling, you never know who is going to step up.”

That can actually be a harder dynamic to defend against than a team that has one stacked top line.

“We have a pretty good idea of what our approach will be,” White said. “But we are going to need to match their intensity, and execute our game plan if we want to win the division.”

MOUNTAIN DIVISION:

M2. UTAH OUTLIERS (.686) @ M1. OGDEN MUSTANGS (.922, host)

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

GAME 1 - Friday, March 29 - 7:30 p.m.

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

GAME 3 - Sunday, March 31 - 1:30 p.m. (if necessary)

The Ogden Mustangs enter this series secure in the knowledge that they have a spot at the table for the 2019 Thorne Cup as the host team. Make no mistake, though, everybody in Ogden wants to go in the front door.

“I don’t think winning organizations get to be who they are by being complacent,” said Ogden head coach Jake Laime. “We want to win...always. If we win, we accomplished a goal that we set early on: win our division. If we lose, we hopefully learn from it, let it burn for a week and come back stronger for the Thorne Cup.”

The Mustangs also hosted the Thorne Cup in 2017 and there is one important similarity between those two Ogden entries: They both won enough to qualify on their own merit.

“I think saying ‘automatic berth’ is a blanket statement that is not really indicative of what we have accomplished this season,” said Laime. “Regardless of who hosts the event, we have earned it, and want to take full advantage of any opportunity we have to be successful.”

The Outliers, on the other hand, need to win this series to extend their season. El Paso and OKC both have higher win percentage than Utah, and one of them will be in the pool of division runners-up, so the Outliers can’t possibly get in as a wild card.

Neither team was tested in the semifinal round. Ogden out-scored Steamboat, 25-1, in their series while Utah did not allow the Casper Bobcats to score at all, out-scoring them 17-0 in their two-game sweep.

Utah has only allowed two goals over their last five games (all against Casper) and has not allowed more than two goals in a contest since a 6-1 loss to Ogden on February 23 – a span of eight games.

Ogden won eight of nine regular season meetings, with the Utah win coming in a shootout, but Utah head coach Paul Taylor sees a path to victory for his club.

“We just need to play a more complete game against Ogden and compete for 60 minutes,” said Taylor. “We also need to find some scoring during the series. We have been able to generate some good chances each game we have played them but we haven't been able to turn those chances into goals.”

Ogden goaltender Artur Ogandzhanyan (26-1-2, 1.83, .938) makes scoring easier said than done, but Taylor and the Outliers are prepared to leave it all on the ice this weekend.

“Compete level and timely scoring will be a key for us moving forward,” he said.

NORTHWEST DIVISION:

NW2. BELLINGHAM BLAZERS (.667) @ NW1. SEATTLE TOTEMS (.686)

Best-of-three series; all games at Olympicview Arena – Seattle

GAME 1 - Friday, March 29 - 7:05 p.m.

GAME 2 - Saturday, March 30 - 7:05 p.m.

GAME 3 - Sunday, March 31 - 12:30 p.m. (if necessary)

The Bellingham Blazers get a do-over in the Northwest Division Final.

The Blazers had the division title in their grasp but let it slip through their fingers in the final weeks of the regular season. They went into the final week just needing to pick up one point from a home-and-home series with Seattle, but lost both games in regulation time, allowing the Totems to claim the first division title in franchise history by a single point.

Seattle won both contests by scores of 7-3 and several Totems stood out on the scoresheet, including four-point weekends from Braden Sanchez and Cameron Waisman. Forward Michael Shippee dished out three assists, giving him an even 100 points (33-67-100) on the season and marking the first time the Seattle native has hit the century mark in scoring over his three-year WSHL career.

The Blazers would happily trade that result for a win here in this series, but regardless of which way this series is decided, one of these teams will be making their first-ever appearance at the Thorne Cup.

Bellingham head coach parted ways with the team last week with assistant Erick Ruud being elevated to head coach. Ruud was running the Blazers bench during their two-game win over the Southern Oregon Spartans in the division semifinal.

The Totems and Blazers had very similar regular seasons, as evidenced by their records. Both the Totems and Blazers participated in three overtime games during the season, but Seattle logged one victory in the extra period while Bellingham lost all three of its overtime games (and there's your extra point).

Goaltender Rustam Kulizade has been a fantastic addition to the Totems roster, adding talent and creating depth in a goaltending corps that already featured Wyatt Monear and Ben Colvin. Kulizade has shined to the tune of a 2.75 goals-against average to go along with a .915 save percentage while racking up 12 wins since coming to Seattle in mid-January.

Last month, Totems Head Coach Mike Murphy spoke on his team's goaltending situation.

"We feel we have a solid one-two punch with Rusty and Wyatt. If one of them gets hot and takes over, we'll ride him," Murphy said.

The Blazers, meanwhile, have some prolific offensive weapons to test the Seattle defense and goaltending. Timothy Prexler (41-80-121) and Jamahl Eakett (50-64-114) both finished in the top-five in the WSHL scoring race and Thomas Steven (52-31-83) also hit the 50-goal mark. Robbie Eichelberger, meanwhile (19-60-79) dished out 60 assists in 48 games.

Kolter Pawlick (14-5-2, 2.83, .914) and Edward Coffey (12-5-1, 2.97, .900) split the starts during the regular season and that has continued down the stretch and into the playoffs. Each netminder made one start in the final regular season set against Seattle and in the division semifinal win over the Southern Oregon Spartans.

PROVINCIAL DIVISION:

P2. HINTON WILDCATS (.533) @ P1. EDSON AEROS (.844)

Best-of-three series; all games at Repsol Place – Edson

GAME 1 - Friday, March 29 - 6:30 p.m.

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

GAME 3 - Sunday, March 31 - 6:30 p.m. (if necessary)

The winner of the Provincial Division Semifinal series between the Edson Aeros and Hinton Wildcats will not just be the division champion (as if that was not enough). They will be the first team from north of the border to participate in a Thorne Cup tournament.

Edson has been the wire-to-wire leader in the division and they made quick work of the Cold Lake Wings in the last round.

“It's been a great season, obviously, for our club,” said Edson head coach Bernie Lynch. “We've spent a lot of time focusing on a game at a time and not looking beyond the immediate task at hand.”

Hinton is the clear underdog, but they battled through some adversity in their first-round series against Meadow Lake, and that could benefit them.

After all, if it doesn't kill you it only makes you stronger.

Hinton head coach Geoff Walker agreed that a “nothing to lose” mentality will be embraced by the Wildcats.

“I am definitely trying to get that point across to my team,” said Walker. “We are definitely the under-dog and we will try to use that as much as possible. That being said, they (Edson) are where they are for a reason.”

Lynch and the Aeros have been pegged to be in this position since they stormed out of the gate in October. It's been a long wait to get around to playing games that matter, but they are not about to look past anybody at this juncture of the season.

“Hinton will present a real challenge for us and we are striving to be ready for them,” said Lynch. “Clearly it's been a huge adjustment for some of our players being on a team that's had this much success so keeping things in perspective is a daily chore, but fun.”

Likewise, the Wildcats have the utmost respect for the Aeros.

“They play the right way with maybe some of the best players this league has ever had, along with solid goaltending from both Austin and Sudberry,” said Walker. “We will have to be at our very best to beat them.”

Despite Edson’s dominance of the entire division – including winning their last eight head-to-head match-ups with Hinton – four of the last five head-to-head meetings between these two teams has been a 1-2 goal game. The Wildcats are hoping to keep building on that.

“The last five or so games against them have been very close,” Walker said. “I feel we haven’t had the bounces against them so we are really hoping that tide can turn in the division final.”

Walker and the Wildcats have a good feel for the Aeros at this point and, after making a few tweaks in practice this week, can’t wait for the puck to drop.

“We have implemented a couple simple system things and when we all buy in and do it to a man it has been successful so we will look to work on that this week,” said Walker. “I think it has the makings of a very exciting series.”

--- Compiled by Scott Harrington for Harrington Sports Media