

WSHL PLAYOFF WRAP-UP; March 28-31, 2019



DIVISION FINAL ROUND – Four overtime games and two Game Threes highlighted the most intense week of play (so far) this year in the Western States Hockey League. Five division playoff champions were crowned and the six-team Thorne Cup playoff field was unveiled:

2019 THORNE CUP QUALIFYING TEAMS:

1. Ogden Mustangs (Mountain Division playoff champion/host)
2. Edson Aeros (Provincial Division playoff champion)
3. Long Beach Bombers (Western Division playoff champion)
4. El Paso Rhinos (Mid-Western Division playoff champion)
5. Bellingham Blazers (Northwest Division playoff champion)
6. Oklahoma City Blazers (wild card)

MID-WESTERN DIVISION

El Paso Rhinos defeat Oklahoma City Blazers, 2 games to 0

The Oklahoma City Blazers had their chance, leading late in the third period of Friday's series opener, but the El Paso Rhinos tied it up, got the winning goal in overtime, and took care of business in Game Two to advance to the Thorne Cup as Mid-Western Division champions. All was not lost for the Blazers, however, as they claimed the sixth and final spot in the tournament as the wild-card team thanks to their impressive regular season record.

El Paso 3, Oklahoma City 2 (OT) – Game One in El Paso was one for the ages as the Rhinos tied it late, then defeated the Oklahoma City Blazers in overtime on a goal by John Erramousepe.

The Rhinos went on the power play down a goal late in the game, and the Blazers almost killed the penalty off, but Adam Stalzer made a strong play coming out of the right corner, taking the puck to the net and trying to stuff it past Oklahoma City goalie Bobby Cloutier (39 saves). The puck stayed out, but Oliwer Stensson grabbed it and quickly swung behind the net and stuffed it in the far side on his backhand to tie the game with 2:05 left in the game.

Erramousepe won the game for the Rhinos 4:34 into sudden-death. Cloutier covered a puck up at the 4:24 mark leading to a faceoff to his right. Off the ensuing faceoff the puck went back to Dominic Erdt at the left point and he played it down the wall and around the corner to Stensson behind the net. Stensson skated to Cloutier's left and got the puck out in front of the net and Erramousepe, going hard to the net, got a puck on the stick and knocked it home for the sudden-death game-winner.

Oklahoma City out-shot El Paso, 10-8, in a scoreless first period, but the Rhinos controlled the shot clock, 32-11, over the final 40 minutes of regulation.

Richie Parent was the Game One starter for El Paso, stopping 19 of 21 shots.

El Paso 6, Oklahoma City 0 – Stensson scored twice and Nils Velm posted a 17-save shutout as the Rhinos closed the series out with a 6-0 win on Saturday.

The Rhinos scored two goals in each period, chasing Cloutier in the second period.

Martin Dubsky and Donald Alchin each had three assists for the Rhinos.

WESTERN DIVISION

Long Beach Bombers defeat Fresno Monsters, 2 games to 1

After dropping the opening game of the Western Division Final, Fresno fought back to win Game Two and force a third and deciding contest, but the Long Beach Bombers came to play Saturday and claimed their fourth straight division playoff title.

Long Beach 4, Fresno 3 – Gennady Malashenko scored the deciding goal as the Long Beach Bombers and Fresno Monsters opened up the week's action with a fantastic display of playoff hockey Thursday night at The Rinks, Lakewood. The host Bombers held on for a 4-3 win.

Three goals in the first 9:31 of the game – the second and third coming just :19 apart – spotted the Bombers to an early 3-0 lead. Fresno came back with a pair but Malashenko, who had already set up Tomas Urbanec's two goals, got the all-important "next goal" at the 11:00 mark of the second period to restore the Bomber's two-goal lead. It turned out they needed the goal and it held up as the game-winner.

William Stromback passed the puck from the right half-wall to Urbanec between the circles. Urbanec loaded up to fire a wrist shot but, instead, slid the puck to Malashenko to the left of Fresno goalie Max Karlenzig. Malashenko turned and slid the puck low inside the far post to give Long Beach a 4-2 lead.

Monsters scoring leader Petr Philippov got Fresno back to within a goal at 10:43 of the third period. It was the only goal of the last 29 minutes of the game. Blair Maguire, who drew an assist on the play, figured in all three Fresno goals – scoring one and setting up two others.

Domenic Bosetti (32 saves) and the Bombers protected the one-goal lead for the final 9:17.

Tyler Mathews started the game in the Fresno crease but was replaced early on by Max Karlenzig who made 38 saves.

Fresno 3, Long Beach 2 – Fresno's Dustin Truex and Jeremy Velazquez scored goals 2:52 apart to break a 1-1 tie and give the Monsters a two-goal lead in Game Two on Friday. Malashenko got one back for Long Beach, but Mathews (48 saves) and the Monsters protected the one-goal lead for the final 8:41 to even the series and force a third and deciding game on Saturday.

Zack Turpin took a hit to deliver a long cross-ice pass diagonally through the neutral zone to Velazquez at the Long Beach blue line along the left boards. He skated into the Bombers zone, cutting to the middle of the ice and making a drop pass to Truex, who collected the puck and fired a low wrist shot inside the far post from the top of the left circle.

Less than three minutes later on a broken play, Long Beach tried to clear their zone, but Velazquez kept it in at the line and just threw the puck on net from just inside the blue line. There were only Bombers defenders in front of Bosetti, but he was screened. He bobbled the puck and watched it bounce off a teammate's leg and into the net for a 3-1 Fresno lead.

Long Beach 7, Fresno 0 – Artem Korolev (2-3-5) figured in five of seven Long Beach goals and Bosetti stopped all 22 shots he faced as the Bombers won Game Three convincingly, 7-0.

Long Beach broke the game open with five goals in the second period – each by a different player. Korolev scored one of them and assisted on three others.

Mathews started between the pipes for Fresno, but was lifted late in the second period after making 30 saves.

MOUNTAIN DIVISION

Ogden Mustangs defeat Utah Outliers, 2 games to 1

Utah will not be going to the Thorne Cup, but they put up a hell of a fight in the Mountain Division Final. The Outliers, needing to beat the league's top team not once but twice to keep their season alive, won a do-or-die Game Two and took Game Three to double overtime, but the Ogden Mustangs prevailed and advanced to the Thorne Cup through the front door as Mountain Division playoff champions.

Ogden 2, Utah 1 (OT) – Oliver Wieringa scored 1:31 into sudden death as the Ogden Mustangs escaped with the win in Game One of the Mountain Division Final.

Harry Gulliver won a faceoff in the Utah zone cleanly back to Wieringa at the right point and his sharp wrist shot went through a maze of sticks and legs into the back of the net, setting off a celebration amongst the Mustangs fans.

Each team scored once in the first period, then a goaltending duel between Ogden's Artur Ogandzhanyan (25 saves) and Utah's Oscar Wahlgren (30 saves) ensued for the final 40 minutes of regulation.

Ogden's Ian Currie broke the ice at the 15:22 of the first period. Wieringa took a holding penalty with 5:07 left in the opening period but, with the Mustangs skating a man down and in their own end, the puck was dumped out into the neutral zone where Currie picked it up and skated in alone on Wahlgren, tucking the puck between his pads with his backhand.

Bryan Watters scored a huge goal for Utah with 2.7 seconds left in the first period. With time running down in the period, Christian Bundschuh made a nice spin move in the Utah end and eluded three Ogden forecheckers. He played the puck up the right-wing boards to Watters in the neutral zone and he picked up speed, entered the Ogden zone, then cut to the middle of the ice and released a 30-foot wrist shot across his body. The puck got past the glove of Ogandzhanyan to tie the game and give the Outliers some jump going into the locker room.

Ogden out-shot Utah, 20-14, over the final two periods of the game but Wahlgren and Ogandzhanyan would not be beaten.

Utah 2, Ogden 1 – The Outliers stayed alive with a 2-1 win on Saturday. Nicholas Ness scored the deciding goal with 13:26 left in the third period and Wahlgren stopped 42 of 43 shots as Utah forced the series to a third game.

With the Outliers on the power play, the puck went back to Bryan Watters at the point and he fired a low, hard shot to Ogandzhanyan's stick side. Matt Bartel collected the rebound, quickly circled behind the net, and fed a pass out to Ness in front of the net and he finished from in close, putting the puck inside the far post.

Wahlgren kept the Mustangs off the board the rest of the way and the Outliers secured their biggest win of the season. The Utah goaltender stopped all 28 shots sent his way over the final two periods.

Rhett Rampinelli scored the Ogden goal midway through the first period and Anthony Masanotti scored the other Utah goal, tying the game at one, 3:10 into the second period.

Ogden 2, Utah 1 (2 OT) – The Outliers made it 58:41 into Game Three with a 1-0 lead, and it looked like Wahlgren was going to backstop Utah to an unlikely upset,

but Gulliver tied it up with just 1:19 to go in regulation and the Mustangs would claim victory late in the second overtime.

It ended up taking 97:16 to decide this epic Game Three but Kerry Kruzel was the hero as the game was just 2:44 away from going to a third overtime. A severe-angle shot from deep in the right corner was stopped by Wahlgren, but Kruzel was on top of him and was able to jam the rebound under his pads for the deciding goal.

Ogandzhanyan stopped 35 of 36 shots but Wahlgren was the story at the other end. He made 34 saves in regulation, coming painfully close to the shutout, but more impressive was his play in the overtimes. With the pressure of knowing that any shot getting past him would end his team's season, Wahlgren made another 32 saves in sudden-death before Kruzel finally scored the series clincher.

NORTHWESTERN DIVISION

Bellingham Blazers defeated Seattle Totems, 2 games to 1

The Bellingham Blazers may have let the Seattle Totems snatch the Northwest Division regular season title from them on the final weekend of the regular season, but they got the best of the Totems when it mattered the most, coming back to win Games Two and Three after dropping the opener and claiming the division playoff title – and a spot at the 2019 Thorne Cup.

Seattle 5, Bellingham 2 – Bellingham's Robbie Eichelberger tied the game at 2-2 with 8:03 to go in the third period, but the Seattle Totems scored three goals in a span of 4:09 at the end of the game for a 5-2 win in Game One of the Northwest Division Final.

Timon Prexler fired a shot from the blue line and Eichelberger, standing at the post to the right of Seattle goalie Rustam Kulizade, re-directed it into the net to tie the game.

Things went Seattle way from that point forward.

Off a faceoff in the left circle in the Bellingham zone, Linus Eriksson made an outstanding individual effort to set up the winning goal, firing a shot on goal, then collecting his own rebound high in the zone before the Blazers could clear it. He skated wide around the slot, evading three Bellingham defenders, then fed a pass to

Zach Thompson in front of the net for his second goal of the game and a 3-2 Seattle lead.

A little over three minutes later a pass went from James Frey at the Seattle blue line up the right boards to Dominik Cach at the Bellingham blue line. He skated to the top of the right circle and, using Tom Ignatovich cutting to the net as a decoy, beat Kolter Pawlick with a wrist shot to the glove side. That gave the Totems a 4-2 lead with just 2:08 left in the game.

Michael Shippee added an empty-netter about a minute later to close out the scoring.

Pawlick and Kulizade each made 29 saves in the game.

Bellingham 5, Seattle 4 (OT) – Thomas Steven scored 6:19 into overtime to keep the Blazers season alive with a 5-4 OT win on Saturday.

Aidan McNabb hustled in to collect a loose puck behind the net following a long shot that Kulizade did not corral. As the Seattle defenders collapsed on him, he managed to get the puck out in front to Steven who one-timed it past Kulizade (20 saves) for the game-winning goal.

Jamahl Eakett scored a hat trick for Bellingham, scoring the only two goals of the first period and giving the Blazers a 4-3 lead with 5.6 seconds remaining in the second period.

Cach scored his second goal of the game 1:57 into the third period and the two teams battled through the last 18:03 of regulation and another 6:19 of sudden-death before Steven ended the game.

Edward Coffey made 40 saves for Bellingham, stopping all 13 shots in the first period as the Blazers built a 2-0 lead.

Bellingham 2, Seattle 0 – The Totems out-shot the Blazers, 41-18, in Sunday's Game Three, but Coffey stopped them all to backstop the Blazers to a 2-0 win and a comeback win in the series.

Both Bellingham goals were scored in the second period, Thomas Steven 1:47 in, and Robbie Eichelberger at the 10:33 mark.

The Blazers began the second period on the power play. A second penalty gave them a five-on-three for a full minute on a nice fresh sheet of ice and they cashed in. Steven was looking for Eichelberger off the far post as he rifled a sharp pass across the ice from his position on the left wing. The puck deflected off the skate of a Seattle defender and past Kulizade (16 saves) to break the ice.

Eichelberger did find the net through the period. There was some mis-communication between the Totems defenseman in the Seattle end along the boards on the right wing. Aidan McNabb hustled in to scoop up a loose puck and fed it with his backhand to Eichelberger in front and he had all the time in the world to pick his shot and beat Kulizade to the glove side.

Seattle out-shot Bellingham, 20-5, in the first period but Coffey stood his ground and allowed the Blazers to compose themselves, get their game going, and eventually post the win.

PROVINCIAL DIVISION

Edson Aeros defeat Hinton Wildcats, 2 games to 0

There were no surprises or upsets in the Provincial Division as the Edson Aeros concluded their wire-to-wire dominance of the WSHL's newest division and, as a result, will be the first Canadian representatives at the Thorne Cup.

Edson 5, Hinton 2 – Five different Edson skaters scored and Liam Austin stopped 38 of 40 shots as the Aeros defeated the Hinton Wildcats, 5-2, on Friday night.

Hinton's Shaun Peacock scored 5:22 into the third period to get the Wildcats within a goal at 2-1, but just 1:31 later Emil Johansson restored the two-goal lead for Edson and just over three minutes after that Olle Berndtsson made it 4-1 Edson and the Aeros were in control of the game.

Hinton netminder Max Gaudet made 31 of his 41 saves over the last two periods.

Edson 5, Hinton 3 – The Edson scoring was spread out again in Game Two as five different Aeros scored in a 5-3 win to wrap up the series.

The game went into the third period tied, 3-3, but Austin (35 saves) stopped all nine shots he faced in the final frame, holding the fort until Ryley Bast scored the game-winner with 5:48 to go.

Hinton attempted to clear the puck up the boards and out of the zone, but Brian Bailer kept it in at the point with his skate and fired a soft shot towards the net. Quentin Stempfel intercepted the shot and slid the puck into the slot to Bast between the circles and he snapped it home high glove.

Kevin Lundin added an empty netter with :20 to go to make the final 5-3 Edson.

Max Gaudet kept the Wildcats in the game with 42 saves.

--- Compiled by Scott Harrington for Harrington Sports Media