



## WSHL WEEKLY NOTES 09.21.17 – MID-WEST DIVISION

### **DALLAS SNIPERS (10-37-5, 25 pts last season)**

**@DallasSnipers**

Dallas had a hard time of it for parts of last season, but were noted for consistently bringing toughness and grit to their games. After making the playoffs and facing off with eventual Thorne Cup Champs from Wichita, coach Aaron Davis sees that experience carrying over to this season.

“I think for the 5-6 returning guys we have coming back, the playoffs were a great experience and a great learning opportunity,” Davis said. “Especially that second game we lost in overtime.”

Coach Davis sees vet Sterling Cooper leading the team after reaching career highs in goals (15), assists (17), and points (32) last year. “Cooper will be our captain this season he has earned it the last few seasons,” Davis added. “His work ethic and determination every single game/practice is unreal. We have a lot of young players this season and if they watch and learn from him they will have successful hockey careers.”

Cooper will have to play a leadership role with newcomers like Verne Ray and Trevor Borlace coming to add some firepower to the Sniper lineup.

“If they follow Cooper’s lead, we will be in good shape,” coach Davis said of the new guys.

Dallas did lose goalie Alex Moustakis, who is now backstopping Oakland University of the ACHA, leaving an opportunity for one of the three new goalies in Sniper camp this year. “I think this is a great opportunity for any of our goalies to work for that starting job,” said Davis.

Aside from the new guys coming in clean to Dallas this season, one player who came over in the middle of last season is looking to pick up right where he left off when he had an immediate impact on the Sniper’s offense. After coming over from Oklahoma City, Jaroslav Vasicek scored a 6-8-14 line in 28 games and looks to have a breakout year in Texas.

“He had a great off season and I expect good things,” coach Davis said of Vasicek. “Sterling Cooper had a career high season last year and if both those guys can stay healthy both will have breakout seasons.”

Coach Davis’ looks to skate a young team, but he’s excited for the opportunity to see how they do.

“We have a few young guys like Chris Mingus who got a good taste of the WSHL last season playing as a 2000, and I think he will have a very productive season,” said Davis. “I like our defense as well – they all are good skaters and move the puck well. I have a fairly young team this season so I am excited to see how they compete, react and learn.”

Dallas goes to Tulsa this weekend to play the Oilers.

### **EL PASO RHINOS (38-12-2, 78 pts)**

**@El\_Paso\_Rhinos**

The El Paso Rhinos will be short last season’s second-leading scorer Alex Johanson (43-49-92) who has gone on to play for Trine University, and their starting goaltender Tymen Edelkoort, who will be playing for Adrian College this year.

But, coach Cory Herman sees his players this season stepping right in to fill the holes.

“I think all of the returning players will be great leaders,” Herman said. “Right now we’re working on competing every shift and being hard to play against.”

And, hard to play against they were last year. The Rhinos were second in the league with 322 goals scored, while also being in the top-5 with only 134 goals against.

This season is sure to see more of the same with an El Paso franchise being known to score as deftly as they prevent other teams from scoring.

The Rhinos will open their season at cross-state rival Dallas to take on the Snipers October 6 – 8.

### **OKLAHOMA CITY BLAZERS (37-14-1, 75 pts)**

**@OKCBlazersWSHL**

Oklahoma City played most of last year in the shadow of El Paso, which started the season just a bit hotter than the Blazers. But new head coach, former Cheyenne Stampede bench boss Gary Gill, sees that feeling of falling short carrying over to this season, especially after dominating parts of last year.

“No athlete wants to finish a season not being fulfilled from all their hard work,” Gill said. “I believe you will see similarities from last year’s team in this year’s team. With an added physical presence and a focused squad.”

Some big names are returning for the Blaze this year including last season’s leading scorer Ivan Bondarenko (29-41-70), Victor Ekk (18-37-55), and defenseman Drake Johnson (8-21-29). Last season we admired OKC’s ability to spread the wealth with players chipping in from all the way down their roster, and this team looks to do the same.

Coach Gill has some new players coming in that he sees making an impact. “Zach Colgrove, Cody Wardner, Josh Chamberlain are just a few guys that me and the coaching staff are excited to see,” Gill said. “Colgrove, Griffin Wiencek, Bondarenko, Ekk are all very explosive and very, very focused on this season. Connor Dunn, Cody Wardner, Travis Hudek, Justin Arnold, Kaleb Foreman - to name a few - will

turn heads with their physical play, and Drake Johnsons shot from the point will bring a crowd to their feet.”

It’s looking to be another exciting season in OKC, and this could very well be the year that the Blazers burn their way out of the shadows and into a Thorne Cup championship.

The Blazers will test themselves early when they host Thorne Cup champs Wichita this weekend.

For more information, visit their new website at [www.okcityhockey.com](http://www.okcityhockey.com)

**SPRINGFIELD EXPRESS (36-15-1, 73 pts)**

**@\_ExpressHockey**

The Springfield Express were never out of the conversation last year, even while finishing fourth in the league’s toughest division. They stretched together some of winning streaks and went into the final two weekends with a chance to win the Mid-West Division. They fell just short last year, but were arguably the best squad Springfield has ever iced in the WSHL.

And now’s the time for the Express to roll.

With a new coach in veteran John Ambrefe, some new players including Swedish forward Bruno Ndossi and Arkhip & Filimon Ledenkov from Belarus, and a few returning players including steady vet Nikita Sokov (15-15-30 in 44 games last year), Springfield is looking to separate themselves from the pack this year.

The Express will begin their season September 29 with the Thorne Cup champs from Wichita.

**TULSA JR. OILERS (13-38-1, 27 pts)**

**@TulsaOilersWSHL**

The Oilers will look to improve on their 13 wins last season, and a new ownership group may help them get there.

Now owned by Brass Roots Hockey, LLC, Tulsa will be leaning on veteran players like hard-nosed defenseman Erich Polacik (104 PIM last season) to get this team out of the division cellar.

Head Coach Marty Magers added local product Derek Smith, who scored a 42-85-127 line in 160 games as a defenseman in the WSHL, to his coaching staff this year.

Tulsa hosts Dallas this weekend.

**WICHITA JR. THUNDER (35-13-4, 74 pts)**

**@JrThunderHockey**

And now, your 2017 Thorne Cup Champion Wichita Jr. Thunder!

It was an incredible year last season for the Thunder, who absolutely played under the radar while division rivals El Paso and OKC drew most of the attention. But, when you play in the league's toughest division, there's bound to be a surprise or two waiting to happen.

Though we were singing their praises most of the year – given that they finished with three players posting 100+ points on the season – coach Rob Weingartner's team carried momentum into the playoffs and hope to do the same this year.

"We had a year to remember that's for sure, but it was more of a build up to that point," coach Weingartner said. "We had so many returning players last year, which led to a good understanding of our systems and playing for each other. With the core group aged out, we only have a half-dozen returners returning, most notably being Simon Sefcik (3-8-11 in 11 GP last year) and Martin Trudman (6-11-17 in 19 GP) who just returned from their time in the NAHL."

Even after losing the likes of MVP Peter Cicmanec (52-85-134), Oskar Gullstrom (51-78-129), and David Good (39-65-104), the Thunder will still be able to fill the void with the likes of Sefcik, Trudman, and other players coming back to Wichita.

"Tyler Inlow played just six regular season and six play-off games for us at the end of last year, so I am expecting that experience to help him have a big year," Weingartner said. "Corey Steinbarger, Trevor Minard, and Christian Winther round out the returning players that should make an impact this season."

There will be some new local faces wearing the Thunder blue this season, as the team brought some local kids to the fold, hoping to build a foundation for years to come.

"I think the biggest change this season is the amount of local talent we have," added Weingartner. "We have nine local players on the roster and four developmental players – if we can get them all to return next season we will have a solid base of players again."

For now, however, Wichita opens the year with a target on their backs and the tests will come early as they head to division rivals OKC this weekend, before visiting Mid-Western rivals Springfield to close out September. The city of Wichita will get to see the champs October 6-8 when they host Cheyenne.

There's some new blood on the Wichita squad, but coach Weingartner doesn't see the players on this team losing a step in their quest to repeat.

"Jack Lebar and Keegan Barker, two players from Colorado, have been impressive so far in practices and so has local product Braeden Thomas," Weingartner said. "Lebar brings a good skill set to the back end and looks to be very offensive-minded. Barker and Thomas have had the highest compete level in practice and I expect them to bring that every night we play. Samuel Pelech looks to be an offensive force already, he reminds me of Peter Cicmanec when he first got here. If he continues to work hard to understand our North American style, I could see him as one of our top scorers."

--- Tyler Whidden for Harrington Sports Media