

MID-WESTERN DIVISION SEMIFINAL PREVIEW



Photo provided by: Mark Mauno

#3 SPRINGFIELD @ #2 OKLAHOMA CITY BLAZERS

Best-of-three series/all games at Blazers Ice Center

GAME 1 Friday, March 23 6:00 p.m.

GAME 2 Saturday, March 24 4:00 p.m.

GAME 3* Sunday, March 25 3:00 p.m.

**if necessary*

SEASON SERIES

Oklahoma City 9-2-1, 19 points

Springfield 3-7-2, 8 points

December 1 Springfield 4 @ Oklahoma City 5 (2 OT)

December 2 Springfield 1 @ Oklahoma City 10

December 3 Springfield 6 @ Oklahoma City 7

December 15 Oklahoma City 5 @ Springfield 1

December 16 Oklahoma City 5 @ Springfield 4 (OT)

January 26 Oklahoma City 7 @ Springfield 0

January 27 Oklahoma City 6 @ Springfield 1

January 28 Oklahoma City 7 @ Springfield 6
February 4 Oklahoma City 3 @ Springfield 4 (SO)
February 9 Oklahoma City 1 @ Springfield 4
February 10 Oklahoma City 4 @ Springfield 5
February 11 Oklahoma City 8 @ Springfield 2

PREVIOUS PLAYOFF MEETINGS

The Springfield Express faced the Oklahoma City Blazers in the playoffs in each of their first two years in the WSHL, dropping a third and deciding game in the division semifinals in 2015 and division finals in 2016.

PLAYOFF HISTORY

Oklahoma City - The OKC Blazers are in their fourth year in the WSHL and have made it at least to the division semifinals in all four seasons. They are looking for the second division playoff title. They beat El Paso, two games to none, in the 2016 division final.

Springfield - The Express have also been in the division semifinals in each of their four years in the WSHL. They made it to the division final just once - 2016 - losing to Oklahoma City two games to one.

OKLAHOMA CITY BLAZERS

Head coach: Gary Gill
42-7-2, 1st place - Mid-Western Division
379 GF / 106 GA

OKLAHOMA CITY SPECIAL TEAMS

POWER PLAY 61/189 (32.3%, 2nd in WSHL)
PENALTY KILL 17/191 (91.1%, 2nd in WSHL - 16 SHG)

KEY PLAYERS

F Ivan Bondarenko (61-65-126), Joshua Chamberlain (39-73-112), Griffin Weincek (43-64-107), Vitalii Mikhailov (42 goals in 39 GP), D Travis Hudek (11-35-46), D Drake Johnson (14-28-42), G Bobby Cloutier (30-7-2/2.18/.924)

SPRINGFIELD EXPRESS

Head coach: John Ambrefe
29-16-6, 3rd place - Mid-Western Division
334 GF / 194 GA

SPRINGFIELD SPECIAL TEAMS

POWER PLAY 68/240 (28.3%, 4th in WSHL)
PENALTY KILL 33/207 (84.1%, 5th in WSHL - 20 SHG)

KEY PLAYERS

F Nikita Sokov (42-45-87), Arkhip Ledenkov (39-42-81), Filimon Ledenkov (25-55-80),

Stephane Doering (27-54-81), Vegard Faret (38-40-78), D Michael Polito (6-35-41), G Kayne Pasquet (8-3-3/3.71/.892)

ANALYSIS

The Oklahoma City Blazers and Springfield Express engaged in a competitive 12-game season series. Oklahoma City won nine of the 12 games, but Springfield took three of the last four, certainly adding some intrigue to this series. Four of the wins for OKC were by a single goal.

This should be a great series - one of the best match-ups in the league this week along with Ogden-Colorado.

The Blazers scored 379 goals in the season (7.4 per game). They also converted 32.3% of the time on the power play while killing off 91.1% of the man-advantage opportunities for the opposition. All three of those metrics, as well as their +273 goal differential, ranked second in the entire 23-team WSHL (division rival El Paso finished #1 in all of those categories, out-shining Gary Gill's team a bit).

Ivan Bondarenko (61-65-126), Joshua Chamberlain (39-73-112) and Griffin Weincek (43-64-107) gave the Blazers three members in the century club, and if Chamberlain had managed one more goal, OKC would have boasted four 40-goal scorers. Sniper Vitalii Mikhailov managed 42 in just 39 games played.

Some teams have a stacked top line - some have balanced scoring - the Express have a little of both with nine regular forwards who all scored at a point-per-game rate (Oscar Andersson, with 41 points in 42 games, almost made 10).

The Express are carrying three goaltenders, but 19-year-old Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan native Kayne Pasquet has emerged as the #1 option down the stretch. He played in nine games against Oklahoma City, including five starts in a two-week span in late January/early February.

At the other end, OKC is A-OK with 30-game winner Bobby Cloutier. The Quebecois keeper posted sterling numbers during the season, and routinely played three games in three days, so he is good to go should the series go the distance - which it very well could.

Blazers head coach Gary Gill was not crazy about having two full weeks off between the end of the regular season and their first playoff action, but they made the most of it.

"We had a little bit of fun and did a lot of team bonding stuff," said Gill. "We did some work making sure we are prepared for Springfield. I would have liked just one week off but this is what we were dealt and we made the best of it. The boys are hungry to play again for sure."

The fact that these two teams have already played each other 12 times - including a stretch of seven straight games against each other from January 26 to February 11 - means players and coaches on both sides have a good feel for each other.

"We know a lot about Springfield and they know a lot about us," said Gill. "I have said this all season long: I don't care what team we play or what the record is. We will not take anyone lightly."

Gill and his squad will certainly not be taking the Express lightly in this series.

"Springfield is a tough team and we will have to perform if we want to continue to reach our goals," he added. "We are looking forward to the weekend that's for sure."

--- *Scott Harrington/Harrington Sports Media*