

WSHL MID-WESTERN DIVISION FINAL PREVIEW



Photo provided by: Mark Mauno

#2 OKLAHOMA CITY BLAZERS @ #1 EL PASO RHINOS

Best-of-three series/all games at Sierra Providence Events Center - El Paso, TX

GAME 1 Friday, March 30 7:00 p.m.

GAME 2 Saturday, March 31 7:00 p.m.

GAME 3* Sunday, April 1 4:30 p.m.

**if necessary*

SEASON SERIES

El Paso 5-0-1, 11 points

Oklahoma City 1-4-1, 3 points

December 8 Oklahoma City 2 @ El Paso 7

December 9 Oklahoma City 1 @ El Paso 4

December 10 Oklahoma City 1 @ El Paso 6

January 12 El Paso 4 @ Oklahoma City 5 (OT)

January 13 El Paso 2 @ Oklahoma City 1 (OT)

January 14 El Paso 3 @ Oklahoma City 1

PREVIOUS PLAYOFF MEETINGS

El Paso and Oklahoma City have faced off in the postseason on two separate

occasions. In the 2014-15 season, the Rhinos beat the Blazers in a three-game set before making it all the way to the Thorne Cup finals, where they lost to Idaho. In 2016, Oklahoma City took down El Paso in a two-game sweep en route to the first conference finals appearance in franchise history.

PLAYOFF HISTORY

El Paso - The Rhinos have made the playoffs in all 12 years of their existence and have at least one playoff series win in each of those 12 seasons. They have won their divisional playoff seven times and have made it to the Thorne Cup championship series or tournament eight times. They were crowned Thorne Cup champions in 2008 and 2014. They defeated Idaho, 7-3, in the 2014 championship game. However, the Rhinos have fallen in the divisional playoff the last two seasons.

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 coming off a division semifinal sweep at the hands of eventual champion Wichita last spring.

EL PASO RHINOS

Head Coach: Cory Herman

49-1-1, 1st place - Mid-Western Division

405 GF / 63 GA

EL PASO SPECIAL TEAMS

POWER PLAY 65/200 (32.5%, 1st in WSHL)

PENALTY KILL 16/249 (93.6%, 1st in WSHL - 38 SHG)

KEY PLAYERS

F Jakob Kranabetter (44-84-128), F Austin Simpson (38-60-98), Chaseton Sare (51-45-96), F Nikita Pintusov (14-12-26 in 11 games with ELP), Philip Pugliese (24-57-81), D Justin-Cole Dubecky (18-58-76), D Colby Haugen (9-36-45), G Filip Krasanovsky (35-1-1/1.35/.929/11 shutouts)

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)

ANALYSIS

In early December, the El Paso Rhinos asserted themselves as the team to beat in the Midwest Division with a strong three-game sweep of second-place Oklahoma City. Much has changed since that series, and the Blazers proved they could compete with the Rhinos by taking three of six possible points in the second series between the two clubs right after the holiday break.

This matchup features two of the premier all-around teams in the WSHL. While the Rhinos were looked at as unbeatable for much of the regular season, the Blazers proved otherwise when they welcomed El Paso to Blazers Ice Center and became the second team to beat them this season.

If there's one team that's capable of stopping the Rhinos from claiming their third Thorne Cup, it's the Blazers. If OKC were in any other division, it likely would have earned a regular-season division title. El Paso Head Coach Cory Herman is expecting a strong effort from the Blazers.

"Oklahoma City is a great team," Herman said. "They're loaded with talent and we will need to play our best for 60 minutes per night to be successful. We are going to give it our best and the chips will fall as they may. Our goal is always to outwork every team we play."

For most of the season, playing harder than the opponent has not been necessary for El Paso. But to its credit, the team played hard every game during the long grind of the regular season. The Rhinos are so loaded with talent that they could have taken it easy some nights and probably would have ended up with a similar record.

Led by WSHL all-time leading scorer Jakob Kranabetter and 90-point scorers Austin Simpson and Chaseton Sare, the Rhinos roster is arguably the best in the league on paper. But talent alone won't take El Paso to the Thorne Cup; it will need to continue to bring the effort and hard work that Herman spoke of.

If you take away its losses to El Paso, Oklahoma City owned a 42-4-1 record this season. This could end up being the biggest test of the postseason for both clubs, though there will certainly be some powerhouse teams in the Thorne Cup tournament in Ogden.

The puck drops for Game 1 this Friday night at Sierra Providence Events Center. The El Paso faithful, who have proven to be some of the best fans in the league, are sure to give their Rhinos some extra motivation as they continue their quest for a third

Thorne Cup championship. As the host, El Paso is guaranteed a place in the Thorne Cup tournament, but the Rhinos will be looking to head into the final round of the postseason coming off a series win.

--- Jared Tennant for Harrington Sports Media