



JEFFREY LUTZ'S CHL REPORT

HOLIDAY RUSH

The Thunder won't be afforded much down time during the holidays. Instead, they'll have to look forward to a relatively slow January, when games are more spread out.

Between Wednesday and the end of the year, Wichita plays seven games, including two against Allen, its nearest pursuer for first place in the Central Hockey League. The Thunder plays Wednesday at Fort Worth, the second of three straight games and four of five against the Brahmas.

Wichita plays on the day after Christmas and on New Year's Eve. That won't allow the Thunder much celebrating, but it could enable Wichita to keep the edge it has created in winning four straight and surging to the top of the standings.

In the past, Wichita has played on Christmas Day. The players seem thankful to have that day off, but time away will still be limited since the Thunder has four games between Dec. 26-31.

"Around the holidays it's always tough because you want to spend time with family and friends," Thunder captain Andrew Martens said. "Not having that Christmas game helps out a lot, and those games that are around Christmas are big for us, especially with the standings the way they are right now."

Highlighting the holiday schedule are two games with Allen, which trails first-place Wichita by one point and owns a home win over the Thunder. Allen has played

three fewer games, so Wichita's lead isn't comfortable.

It can become more comfortable, however, with at least one win over Allen and limited slip-ups elsewhere. Wichita is 3-0 this season against Fort Worth, outscoring the Brahmas 15-5. The Thunder also has a game against Quad City before the end of the year.

"It's always nice to be on a roll and have games that are coming up quick," Martens said. "You don't have much time to think about it, you're just out there playing and trying to feed off the momentum that you've gained from those previous wins."

Wichita has played three games in three nights in each of the past two weekends but doesn't endure another such stretch until the second half of January. In the first half of the month, games are more sporadic on account of no three-in-threes and only a pair of mid-week games.

Some of that portion of the schedule could be just as grinding on the Thunder, though. From Dec. 31 through Jan. 20, Wichita plays one game at Intrust Bank Arena and eight on the road. Only the game at Allen is against a team in the top four in the standings, but the Thunder will still be on high alert.

Wichita isn't thinking about those games yet, though, or even the games against Allen that will help decide the Thunder's positioning entering 2013.

"We've got to worry about what we can control," Martens said. "As long as we take

each game one-by-one, we'll be all right. Those games against Allen, when they come up, are important games. You want to make sure that you're ready to go on those games, too."

SLAP SHOTS

■ Wichita is 17-7-2 entering Wednesday night's game at Fort Worth, for 36 points. At the same point last season, when the Thunder finished with the league's best record and eventually reached the CHL Finals, it was 17-9-0 with 34 points.

■ Missouri climbed into the middle of the CHL standings with a seven-game winning streak the ended Sunday with a 7-3 loss to Bloomington. Missouri was 6-8-2 before the streak began, but the Mavericks now sit eight points behind league-leading Wichita in sixth place.

PLUS

Neil Trimm has quickly become Wichita's most dependable scorer. During the first month of the season, four Thunder players scored more points than Trimm, but he was the team's second leading scorer in November and leads Wichita with 11 points this month. Todd Griffith is next with seven.

MINUS

Thunder defenseman Jarred Mohr didn't miss a game in either of the previous two seasons, but he has missed 12 this year. After missing nearly a month due to injury, Mohr

returned on Dec. 1, but he has been inactive since Dec. 9 due to an undisclosed injury.

TAP OF THE STICK

Wichita defenseman Kevin Young was named the CHL player of the week. Young scored a goal in each of Wichita's three games, finishing with four points as the Thunder went 3-0. Young's hot streak has extended beyond the week – he has 17 points in 18 games since Nov. 30 and is fourth on the Thunder with 24 points.

PENALTY BOX

Erick Lizon, Wichita's hard-hitting enforcer, said Tulsa newcomer Daniel Amesbury wouldn't last long in the league if he didn't improve his fighting skills. Lizon got the best of Amesbury when the two squared off twice during Saturday's game in Wichita.

DEFINING DIGITS

1.65

Kevin Regan's goals-against average in his last nine starts. The Wichita goalie is 8-1-0 in that stretch, boosting his league-leading wins total to 11.

HE SAID IT

"Primarily you've got to take care of your own end then, for myself, it's trying to pick the right spots to jump off. With our forwards and the creativity they have, they'll find you."

– Young on his scoring surge

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