



JEFFREY LUTZ'S CHL REPORT

The road ahead

A well-rested Thunder produced three wins in three days last weekend. That's essentially the last time Wichita will have the luxury of recovery this season, as the final 30 games include several clusters like the current one.

Those three wins began a stretch of seven games in 12 days. The fourth game in the stretch came Tuesday night, a 3-2 shootout win at Tulsa. Wichita appeared refreshed over the weekend, as forward RG Flath predicted following one game over the prior 12 days.

"Maybe we just needed a little bit of a mental break, getting away from the rink," Flath said last week.

The Thunder responded to a brief psychological vacation with a trifecta of wins and has now won five in a row. Those victories have the Thunder clinging to playoff positioning, but the next month presents an even great opportunity for Wichita to become a factor in the postseason race.

It seems as if the battle for contention has been separate to the Thunder's season, as Wichita hasn't played league-leading Rapid City since late November and hasn't hosted second-place Allen since the second game of the season.

But over the next 13 games, the Thunder plays Rapid City, Allen and third-place Missouri seven times, giving the Thunder a chance to pull away from other possible lower playoff seeds while damaging the frontrunners. The scheduled is back-loaded with more important games over the final month.

"It all started with three in three," goalie David Brown said after Sunday's win against Missouri. "That's a tough weekend for any team (and) to be able to go three in three is huge. Those are big points, and we need to make sure we keep winning, to use the games we have in hand during this tough stretch to vault up and solidify a playoff spot."

A grueling upcoming slate might actually serve the Thunder well, if this weekend gave any indication. Perhaps Wichita's most impressive of the 10 periods it played (including one overtime) was the third period of the final game, when the Thunder cemented a 2-1 win over Missouri.

The schedule may not be optimal for a fringe postseason team that could probably use all the late-season rest it can get, but no one with the Thunder denies the possibilities it presents.

"We don't want to go through a rough stretch like we did at the beginning of the year and come up with a bunch of injuries," coach Kevin McClelland said. "We want to monitor guys' rest and use our bench. We've just got to make sure we come out and play well, hopefully avoid the injuries, and start moving up in the standings."

■ Thunder forward Jon Booras was chosen the CHL player of the week. In leading the Thunder to three wins in three days, Booras had three goals and a pair of assists. Booras, Wichita's leading scorer, was the league's player of the month for December, when he notched his 500th professional point.

Plus

Wichita's second line, consisting of RG Flath, Matt Summers and Tomas Klempa, has combined for 16 points during the Thunder's four-game winning streak. The trio has proven a strong complement to the top line of Booras, Matt Robinson and Ian Lowe.

Minus

Both Steven-brother-owned CHL teams are in danger of missing the postseason. Thunder owners Johnny, Brandon and Rodney Steven purchased the Tulsa Oilers this summer and Tulsa initially seemed stronger for it. But the Oilers have lost seven of 10 to fall into sixth place, seven points ahead of ninth-place Arizona.

Tap of the stick

Thunder teammates Andrew Martens and Jesse Dudas, each with 30 points, are tied for the league lead in scoring among defensemen. Mike Wilson is one spot out of the top 10 with 18 points, giving Wichita the highest-scoring defenseman trio in the CHL.

Penalty box

Denver is being forced to play home games in other Colorado locales while the National Western Stock Show inhabits Denver Coliseum. The Cutthroats play in Vail this weekend after winning a pair of games over Tulsa in Aspen this month.

Defining digit

7

Since returning from the

injured list on January, Klempa has seven points in six games, scoring in every game in which the Thunder has not been shut out.

He said it

"I looked for Booras backdoor there at the end of the game. I should have shot it. I wanted it, too."

— Dudas on an attempt at assisting on a Booras hat trick during Wichita's 7-1 win over Quad City on Friday, when Dudas also scored two goals.

Tuesday's Game

RG Flath scored the only goal in the shootout, lifting the Thunder to a 3-2 win at Tulsa. Goalie David Brown stopped all five Oiler attempts in the shootout.

Matt Robinson sent the game to overtime with a goal at 19:06 of the third period. The Thunder was skating 6-on-4 after pulling the goalie, thanks to a tripping penalty on Craig Cescon.

Wichita	1	0	1	0	1	—	3
Tulsa	0	1	1	0	0	—	2

First period — 1, Wichita, M. Wilson (Walker), 9:27. Penalty — Cescon, Tulsa (boarding), 1:40.

Second period — 2, Tulsa, Beausoleil (Bochek, Robinson), 6:24. Penalties — Walker, Wichita (roughing), 15:02; Beausoleil, Tulsa (interference), 15:19; Klempa, Tulsa (goalie interference), 19:28.

Third period — 3, Tulsa, Bochek (Robinson, Menei), 9:23. 4, Wichita, Robinson (Booras), 19:06 (pp) (ea). Penalties — Summers, Wichita (tripping), 2:22; Tallent, Tulsa (roughing), 6:39; Walker, Wichita (high sticking), 14:25; Cescon, Tulsa (tripping), 19:02.

Overtime — none. Penalty — Beausoleil, Tulsa (hooking), 4:46.

Shootout — Wichita 1 (Robinson NG, Summers NG, Booras NG, Klempa NG, Flath G), Tulsa 0 (Beausoleil NG, Tobin NG, Pleskach NG, Gordon NG, Menei NG).

Power plays — Wichita 1-5, Tulsa 0-4.

Shots — Wichita 6-7-14-3-1—31, Tulsa 11-13-8-3-0—35.

Goalies — Wichita, Brown, 35 shots, 33 saves;

Tulsa, Madolara 30-28.

A — 3,940.

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