



JEFFREY LUTZ'S CHL REPORT

Sold on the CHL

Despite Tulsa's and the Thunder's precarious playoff positioning, Rodney Steven, co-owner of both Central Hockey League franchises, wouldn't change his decision to branch out beyond the Thunder this offseason.

Steven, who owns the Thunder and the Oilers with brothers Brandon and Johnny Steven, and who is the interim chairman for Central Partners LLC, which owns the CHL, has helped to stabilize Tulsa and the league.

What hasn't been quite as stable is the on-ice product for both teams. Tulsa is in eighth place, the final postseason spot if the season ended Wednesday and one spot above the Thunder. Attendance for both teams also hasn't been optimal considering the size of their buildings.

"It goes back to the original reason we bought the team," Rodney Steven said. "We're all-in with the Wichita Thunder and we want the best league we can for the Thunder.... I think it was a good decision for us, and I think it has gone similar to what I thought."

Both teams are among the top three in attendance and were in the top four last season, numbers perhaps skewed

by the fact that they play in the league's two largest facilities.

Tulsa's attendance has gone up by about 400 fans per night but Wichita's, which has dropped the past two seasons after a peak of 6,249 two years ago, has fallen by about 1,000 fans from a league-best total of 5,599 last season.

"Over the years this isn't a one-, two-, three-, four-year deal for us," Steven said. "We want to own this team (Wichita) for a long, long time until it grows. We will be consistent and diligent in those practices — consistent in advertising, consistent in putting a good team on the ice."

Tulsa won 9 of 11 games in a November stretch and six of its first nine in November to be mentioned along the league's potential contenders, but since then the Oilers have mostly struggled, going 3-7-1 in January before rebounding this month.

The Thunder has had a season of ups and downs but hasn't been above its current .500 record and is in danger of missing the playoffs for the first time in coach Kevin McClelland's four seasons.

Still, Steven believes the two teams he owns with his brothers can eventually be successful at the same time. Maybe not even eventually.

"I think they both will this year," Steven said. "I think they're both going to go deep in the playoffs this year, I just hope they don't face each other. We're always going to be two of the toughest teams in the league, I guarantee that."

Slap shots

■ After starting the season by winning a CHL-record 20 times in its first 23 games, Rapid City has gone 9-15-1 to drop to third place. The Rush is 8-8 without star goalie Tim Boron, who has missed time due to injury.

■ To address a four-game losing streak that has dropped Allen into fourth place, the Americans acquired three-time CHL All-Star center Bruce Graham this week. Graham scored 62 points in 48 games for Allen in 2011-12.

Plus

Thunder goalie David Brown won his league-best fourth shootout Friday in Brampton. Brown has allowed three goals on 21 shootout attempts.

Minus

Wichita has already clinched its fewest victories in

a season at Intrust Bank Arena with nine wins with 10 games to play. The Thunder won 24 and 25 the previous two years and 20 in 2010-11, when it started the schedule at the Kansas Coliseum.

Tap of the stick

Defenseman Jon Madden, usually a physical force for the Thunder as an opposition intimidator, has become more of a scoring threat, at least comparatively speaking. Madden has four goals in 36 games, more than he tallied in his final collegiate season and first pro season over 98 games.

Defining digits

18-17

Even with nine players owning a positive plus-minus rating during February, the Thunder has outscored opponents by a single goal.

He said it

"Our attendance hasn't grown this year like we would have liked, but we're going to continue to keep growing it until it does. Consistency prevails when all else fails."

— Steven

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