

Winterhawks seize playoff slot

PORTLAND SEALS FINAL PLAYOFF SPOT WITH CLOSE VICTORY OVER PRINCE GEORGE COUGARS

BY TRAVIS DAVID V WHITTAKER

The Portland Winterhawks defeated the Prince George Cougars 5-4 on March 8. With the win, the Hawks clinched the eighth and final spot in the Western Hockey League's Western Conference after the Spokane Chiefs lost to the Everett Silvertips.

With the Portland Winterhawks advancing to the playoffs for the eighth straight season, the team is confident with how they are playing moving forward into the last couple of games in the regular season.

The stretch of eight playoff appearances includes four straight Western Conference championships, as well as the 2013 Ed Chynoweth Cup team who ended up losing the 2013 Memorial Cup final to the Halifax Mooseheads.

"We've got some divisional teams here to play next, and it's a good statement going into the playoffs," said Hawks centreman Ryan Hughes.

With only a handful of games left and less and less games to earn points towards the standings, teams who have clinched a playoff spot are looking to secure a possible division title as well as seeding in the Western Conference playoff race.

"Wherever we end up, we're just gonna play hard. I think we match up well against any team."

—Cody Glass

Winterhawks centreman Cody Glass was named the Western Hockey League Player of the Week for the week ending March 12 and is considered a top 20 pick by Sportsnet's Jeff Marek in his March mock draft for the June NHL draft. Glass is confident with how his team has been playing down the stretch of the regular season and who they could match-up with.

"Wherever we end up, we're just gonna play hard," said Glass. "I think we match up well against any team."



The Winterhawks' Cody Glass, No. 8, faces off against the Cougars' Brogan O'Brien, No. 15, on March 8 at the Moda Center.

As of the last week of the regular season, Portland has the possibility of matching up to four teams in the first round of the playoffs.

The two teams that are most likely to come into play are the Seattle Thunderbirds and the Everett Silvertips. At the time of press, Portland would be playing Everett, who they split the regular season series with at five games each, but Portland is 5-2 in the past seven of those games.

Everett features Carter Hart, one of the best goalies in the WHL in terms of overall stats.

Hart leads the WHL in goals against and in overall shutouts with a 2.01 goals against average and nine shutouts. Hart was also drafted in the second round, 46th overall last June by the Philadelphia Flyers.

Portland could face Seattle, a team they have gone 5-6 with this season, with one regular season matchup left on March 18.

But Seattle could be without one of their best players in Matthew Barzal, who may be sick with the mumps virus.

"We are treating it as mumps until we learn otherwise," said Seattle General Manager Russ Farwell on March 13.

A few weeks ago, the league had a ban on access to all players, league-wide, due to ongoing reports of mumps. It was lifted, but could be put back into effect as players could have the virus arise once again.

The two other teams that Portland could match up with are the Prince George Cougars and the red-hot Kelowna Rockets.

The Hawks have fared better against Prince George this season, going 2-1-0-1, whereas with Kelowna they are 1-3.

Kelowna has won seven in a row and nine of their past ten.

The last time the Hawks played Kelowna was at the end of January when they lost 5-4. Of the four teams that Portland could match up with, I see Kelowna as the least

likely for Portland to see in the opening round of playoffs.

The downfall of playing Prince George is the long bus trips. From Portland to Prince George B.C. is a 13-hour bus ride. With the potential for a long series, the Hawks could make the trip north three times in a two-week span, if the series were to go to seven games.

Assistant coach Oliver David feels the team would be confident against them in the playoffs.

"Were down for some competition," said David. "If [the playoffs] were to start today, we would be on a big upswing; and if [Prince George] was our opponent, we would feel very confident."

The Hawks have two games left to try and improve their seeding. Those are against the Seattle Thunderbirds and the Spokane Chiefs.

The postseason will start the following weekend in either Kent or Everett, Wash, Prince George, B.C. or Kelowna B.C.

photo by Austin Boltz