

TRY TO BEAT THAT!: THE 1978-79 BRANDON WHEAT KINGS

Brandon sweeps Saskatoon for berth in semis

BY PERRY BERGSON

One year after suffering heartache in the first round of the 1977-78 Western Hockey League playoffs, the Brandon Wheat Kings showed just how completely they had learned their lesson.

That takes us back to the oddest post-season format in league history.

At the time, there were three divisions in the 12-team league, the Eastern, Central and Western. The top three clubs in each division played an eight-game round-robin, with a double home and away against the other two top finishers.

The eight games eliminated one team per division, with the two top finishers playing a best-of-seven division final. That provided three division winners, who played a home-and-home series against each other in a four-game round-robin. One of the three teams was eliminated, providing the two league finalists.

Brandon faced the Edmonton Oil Kings and the Saskatoon Blades in the first round-robin.

DON GILLEN: "I really enjoyed spring hockey. I was in better shape and I didn't want to go home. I enjoyed the nicer climate, I enjoyed playoffs that were meaningful. I loved playoff hockey and I still do."

GREGG DRINNAN: "Going into the playoffs, because Dunc (McCallum) took such a business-like approach and treated the players like men, (it was) 'This is our job, playoffs are here, OK guys, we just played 72 games to get here, let's go.' I don't think there was any talk of the previous year, but guys like Brad McCrimmon weren't going to forget what happened and I'm sure Brad let them know how it happened."



TOP RIGHT: Brandon Wheat Kings forward Don Gillen carries the puck through the neutral zone under the watchful eye of teammate Brad Kempthorne (19) and a pair of Saskatoon Blades during Game 8 of the East Division round-robin on April 8, 1979. **TOP LEFT:** As bad life decisions go, perhaps choosing to drop the gloves against Brandon defenceman Tim Lockridge during a 13-1 loss isn't a great idea. The fight came in the meaningless eighth game of the divisional round-robin on April 8, 1979 after both Brandon and the Saskatoon Blades already clinched their spots in the divisional final. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** Brandon Wheat Kings forwards Dave Stewart (9) and Kelly McCrimmon (18) attack the Edmonton Oil Kings net during Game 5 of the East Division round-robin on April 3, 1979 at the Keystone Centre. Brandon won 5-3. **BOTTOM LEFT:** The scoreclock tells the story in Game 8 of the East Division round-robin on April 8, 1979. The Brandon Wheat Kings blasted a Saskatoon Blades squad that was resting many of its top players for their upcoming divisional final. (Brandon Sun file photos)

ROUND-ROBIN NO. 1

On March 29, Brandon won the opener 4-0 in Lloydminster, Alta. — the Oil Kings couldn't get into their building, nor could the Wheat Kings because of the Winter Fair — so they didn't repeat the opening loss from a year ago.

A night later, the unthinkable happened when Saskatoon beat Brandon 5-4 in double overtime on Terry Paskurak's goal. Suddenly Brandon found itself behind Saskatoon in the round-robin standings, and while it was ahead of Edmonton and thus likely to advance, it was a setup for a team that had only lost five games all season.

WES COULSON: "We went back to Saskatoon and played the next night and we got beat. Now it like 'Holy s— Is this going to happen to us again?' Nobody said anything, that we were going to have a great regular season and then s— the bed in the playoffs again. In the back of my mind I was thinking 'Hmm, we're supposed to win all the games and now we're 1-1?' Then we went back to Edmonton and beat them and then we beat Saskatoon and came home 3-1 after the four road games. We started on the road because of the Manitoba Winter Fair. Once we got into our own building, it was 'No, we're rolling now.'"

DAVE McDONALD: "We were still confident. We didn't think we weren't going to win the league. That was just our mindset. There was nothing stopping us."

GREGG DRINNAN: "The players had gone through it and I'm certain that it was stuck in their minds. I think

WHEAT KINGS REGULAR SEASON HEAD TO HEAD

EAST DIVISION (39-3-6)	
• Saskatoon Blades	—10-2-4 (6-5, 12-3, 8-8, 10-3, 7-7, 10-3, 3-3, 4-1, 5-4, 6-2, 8-3, 3-2, 5-1, 1-1, 6-7, 4-6).
• Regina Pats	—16-0-0 (9-5, 12-0, 9-3, 8-2, 8-4, 7-1, 8-4, 9-3, 6-5, 8-3, 5-1, 7-5, 5-2, 7-3, 14-4, 9-3)
• Edmonton Oil Kings	—13-1-2 (6-0, 6-3, 3-1, 14-2, 7-2, 3-3, 3-1, 4-9, 9-5, 8-4, 4-4, 9-2, 8-2, 11-2, 6-4, 6-5).
CENTRAL DIVISION (14-1-1)	
• Billings Bighorns	—2-1-1 (7-3, 4-4, 5-6, 6-3).
• Lethbridge Broncos	—4-0-0 (11-2, 9-2, 4-3, 7-5).
• Calgary Wranglers	—4-0-0 (6-2, 6-4, 8-3, 8-6).
• Medicine Hat Tigers	—4-0-0 (12-2, 8-2, 6-3, 7-1).
WEST DIVISION (5-1-2)	
• Portland Winter Hawks	—1-1-0 (2-3, 7-4).
• Victoria Cougars	—2-0-0 (7-3, 3-2).
• New Westminster Bruins	—0-0-2 (1-1, 5-5).
• Seattle Breakers	—2-0-0 (12-2, 4-3).

MEMORIAL CUP	
• Trois-Rivières Drakkar	—1-1-0 (1-4, 6-1)
• Peterborough Petes	1-2-0 (6-7 (OT), 3-2, 1-2 (OT))

when they got to the playoffs in the spring of 1979 that it was more of a case of 'We know what the job is and know what's ahead of us, let's just get it done' and away they went."

How did they respond? The Wheat Kings started another winning streak, earning victories in their next six games to move on, with the Blades joining them.

SASKATOON SERIES

On paper, the Saskatoon series looked like it might be a decent one. While the mighty Wheat Kings finished an astonishing 59 points

WHL FINAL STANDINGS

GP	W	L	T	Pt	GF	GA	
Brandon	72	58	5	9	125	491	230
Saskatoon	72	26	32	14	66	385	398
Edmonton	72	17	43	12	46	288	403
Regina	72	18	47	7	43	297	481
CENTRAL DIVISION							
GP	W	L	T	Pt	GF	GA	
Billings	72	38	23	11	87	378	302
Lethbridge	72	37	28	7	81	389	326
Calgary	72	28	38	6	62	349	392
Medicine Hat	72	15	50	7	37	270	479
WEST DIVISION							
GP	W	L	T	Pt	GF	GA	
Portland	72	49	10	13	111	432	265
Victoria	72	34	27	11	79	318	295
New West	72	34	32	6	74	310	301
Seattle	72	21	40	11	53	299	334

The teams all played 72 games. The top three clubs in each division made the playoffs. East Division: Brandon Wheat Kings, Saskatoon Blades, Edmonton Oil Kings, Regina Pats. Central Division: Billings Bighorns, Lethbridge Broncos, Calgary Wranglers, Medicine Hat Tigers. West Division: Portland Winter Hawks, Victoria Breakers, New Westminster Bruins, Seattle Breakers.

ahead of the second-place Blades in the standings, Saskatoon had proven to be a tough foe as the season went on. Two of Brandon's five regular season losses came to the Blades in the final month of the season, and the teams also tied four times in their 16 meetings. As the playoff round-robin had shown, Saskatoon could also win a game that went to overtime.

The series started in Brandon on April 10, and all those equations were quickly tossed out the window.

The Wheat Kings stormed out to 9-1 victory in Game 1, and took a 5-3 decision in Game 2 to go up 2-0.

That sent the series back to Saskatoon, and the Blades took a 3-1 lead in the first period. But shortly after Saskatoon tied it 5-5 early in the third period, Ray Allison

WHL REGULAR SEASON SCORING

Player	GP	G	A	Pt	PIM
Brian Propp	71	94	100	194	127
Ray Allison	62	60	93	153	191
Laurie Boschman	65	66	83	149	215
Brad McCrimmon	66	24	74	98	139
Dave Stewart	66	24	55	79	90
Mike Perovich	52	15	58	73	170
Steve Patrick	62	23	31	54	105
Brad Kempthorne	56	22	31	53	89
Tim Lockridge	70	10	42	52	297
Don Gillen	64	21	30	51	212
Wes Coulson	66	13	38	51	99
Brant Kiessig	69	29	15	44	108
Don Dietrich	69	6	37	43	29
Dave McDonald	43	19	20	39	110
Kelly McCrimmon	40	15	24	39	139
Dave Chartier	48	14	12	26	83
Darren Gusdal	61	11	13	24	52
Walt Poddubny	20	11	11	22	12
Larry Roberts	55	8	10	18	26
Kelly Elcombe	45	3	15	18	145
Pat Workman	6	1	2	3	0
John McPhee	25	1	2	3	46
Rick Knickle	38	0	3	3	15
Laverne Poppo	4	1	0	1	0
Greg Mann	1	0	1	1	0
Scott Olson	35	0	1	1	21
Dean Rebeck	1	0	0	0	0
Mike Moskaluk	1	0	0	0	2

REGULAR SEASON GOALIES

Player	GP	Min	GA	GAA	Record
Rick Knickle	38	2240	118	3.16	26-3-8
Scott Olson	35	2080	112	3.23	32-2-1

delivered the dagger that proved to be the winning goal in a 7-5 victory.

On April 14, Brandon took a 5-0 lead, and while Saskatoon was able to edge back within a goal, the Wheat Kings closed out the series with a 6-4 win to advance to the semifinal round-robin.

DAVE STEWART: "I remember saying to myself and my teammates that after we won the first game or two that we're not losing. We're sweeping, and we did. It just gave us more confidence, especially against Saskatoon. They had a decent team."

WES COULSON: "We just had a hate on for Saskatoon because we played them

WHEAT KINGS REGULAR SEASON LOSSES

• Edmonton 9, Brandon 4 Game 30, Dec. 13, 1978 Record: 24-1-5.
• Portland 3, Brandon 2 Game 38, Jan. 15, 1979 Record: 31-2-5.
• Billings 6, Brandon 5 Game 51, Feb. 11, 1979 Record: 41-3-7.
• Saskatoon 7, Brandon 6 Game 68, March 16, 1979 Record: 55-4-9.
• Saskatoon 6, Brandon 4 Game 71, March 21, 1979 Record: 57-5-9.

WHL SCORING LEADERS

Player	GP	G	A	Pt	PIM
Brian Propp/BWK	71	94	100	194	127
Ray Allison/BWK	62	60	93	153	191
L. Boschman/BWK	65	66	83	149	215
Duane Sutter/Leth	71	50	75	125	212
Doug Morrison/Leth	72	56	67	123	159
Kelly Kisko/Calgary	70	60	61	121	73
Mike Toal/Port	71	38	83	121	32
Brent Ashton/Sas	62	64	65	119	180
Perry Turnbull/Port	70	75	43	118	191
Gord Williams/Leth	72	58	59	117	60

about 67 times that winter. It seemed like every other game was against Saskatoon. And Kelly McCrimmon loved that, because he loved to run Kenny Federko." (laughs)

DAVE CHARTIER: "We just rolled (Saskatoon). A for effort to those guys and I back fed for what we did but back then, that's the way it was."

ROUND-ROBIN NO. 2

The semifinal round-robin almost seemed like a formality.

First-place Brandon (58-5-9) came out of the East Division, first-place Portland (49-10-13) came out of the West

Division and the second-place Lethbridge Broncos (38-27-7) — the Swift Current Broncos moved there for 12 seasons between 1974 and 1986 before returning to Saskatchewan — represented the Central Division after the Billings Bighorns were unexpectedly ousted.

KELLY MCCRIMMON: "Pick three worse cities to stick into a round-robin in terms of geography."

TIM LOCKRIDGE: "That round-robin thing made no sense at all but it was what the league wanted to do back then I guess."

The Wheat Kings had outscored the Broncos 31-12 in the regular season, and it was more of the same in the opener in Lethbridge on April 19 as Brandon cruised to a 6-1 victory.

The Wheat Kings flew to Vancouver the next morning and bused to Portland, where the Winter Hawks were waiting for them. What ensued was the worst beating of the year for Brandon as it fell 10-0 to the West Division champs.

WES COULSON: "We weren't very good that night. If I remember right, we bused to Calgary, went down to Lethbridge and beat them in the first game, went back to Calgary, left in the morning, flew to Vancouver and then bused to Portland to play that next game. We came out of the dressing room first and they had 11,000 people in the building, it was jammed to the rafters, and out they came and it was just bedlam. I think we kind of got looking around 'Holy crap, what the hell is going on here?' It was one of those nights when you blink your eyes twice and you're down 4-0. Then they just poured it on and there was nothing we could do. We just couldn't stop the bleeding at all."

GREGG DRINNAN: "I don't know if Dunc really had to deliver a message to the guys. I'm sure at that point that guys like Brad and Tim Lockridge would have a message that 'This was just a bad one, we're better than this, let's not let this happen again and get back at it.'"

TIM LOCKRIDGE: "I think we were just dog tired again. I remember that game and we all kind of looked at each other and knew we were a better hockey team than them. I think they were sitting there waiting for us too. It's not like they were travelling the day before. That game to me, I remember it but I think I mentally blocked most of it."

STEPHEN PATRICK: "That was an eye-opener."

DAVE STEWART: "You get thrashed. So what? You put it behind you."

GREGG DRINNAN: "I remember Dunc after the game giving the media who was there the upset coach routine and whispering to me later that 'This might be the best thing that ever happened to us.'"

Four days later, with three days of rest and the taste of a terrible beating in their mouths, they pounded Lethbridge 13-3 to knock the Broncos (0-4) out of the playoffs.

All that remained was one last, meaningless game against Portland, the team had beaten them so badly days earlier and was destined to be their opponent in the final.

Brian Propp scored his third goal of the game in overtime to lift Brandon to a 5-4 victory.

Two nights later, the real work began.

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