

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

Brandon wins league title in six games

BY PERRY BERGSON

The 1979 Western Hockey League final featured its two best teams, the Brandon Wheat Kings and the Portland Winter Hawks.

Brandon (58-9) had finished 14 points ahead of Portland (49-10-13), which was the top club in the more competitive West Division.

A sense of the dominance the two teams had on the league came when the all-star teams were named. Brandon's entire top line of Brian Propp, Ray Allison and Laurie Boschman was named to the first team, along with defenceman Brad McCrimmon and goalie Rick Knickle.

The only first team spot to get away from the Wheat Kings went to Winter Hawks defenceman Keith Brown. On the second team, Portland forwards Mike Toal and Perry Turnbull and defenceman Blake Wesley all earned nods.

Brandon and Portland split four meetings in the regular season and playoffs prior to the final.

The teams met twice in the regular season, with the Winter Hawks winning 3-2 in Brandon on Jan. 15, and the Wheat Kings earning a 7-4 decision in Portland on Feb. 14. They also split the two games in the semifinal round-robin.

Brandon's high-scoring offence was countered by Portland's top forwards, Toal (71 games played, 38 goals, 83 assists, 121 points), Turnbull (70gp, 75 g, 43a, 118p), Alvin Szott (72gp, 40g, 61a) Tim Tookey (56gp, 33g, 47a, 80p), Jim Dobson (71gp, 38g, 39a, 77p) and Florent Robidoux (70gp, 36g, 41a, 77p). They also had high-scoring blue-liners Brown (70gp, 11g, 85a, 96p) and Dave Babych (67gp, 20g, 59a, 79p).

The Winter Hawks were also tough, with Wesley leading the way with 292 penalty minutes, followed by Turnbull (191), Max Kostovich (178) and Dobson (143).

In net, Warren Skorodenski of the Calgary Wranglers earned second team all-star honours ahead of Portland's Bart Hunter, but it couldn't have been an easy decision. Hunter appeared in 55 contests, posting a 3.82 goals-against average in the wide-open game played at the time.

LAURIE BOSCHMAN: "I remember them being equally as good. I don't know what their record was all season but they had a very good squad as well."

KELLY MCCRIMMON: "It was such a good series and such good teams."

BRIAN PROPP: "Portland had a really good team and that was a tough series. We found a way to win but it was tough. They had a good team, and a big team. We did as well as we did because we had tough players too and it made a big difference. It was an unbelievable series."

STEPHEN PATRICK: "They were real talented with Tim Tookey, (Perry) Turnbull, Keith Brown on defence. They were a bit of a carbon copy of us. I think some of their second and third-line players might have scored a little more than our second and third line did because that was just the way that conference was over there, where they had higher scoring games. They were talented. Perry Turnbull was a beast of a player and I don't think Keith Brown came off the ice. Brad (McCrimmon) was the best player and he should have been defenceman of the year but that's just the way it goes. I think they might have been a little smaller than us. (Dave) Babych was a helluva player. He could shoot like a man and his balance was unbelievable. I remember running him and bouncing off of him in Brandon. He was real strong."

TIM LOCKRIDGE: "They were a big, physical team too. They had some guys who could play physical. They were very well coached and played in that West



The Brandon Wheat Kings and Portland Winter Hawks congregate near the Brandon bench during Game 2 of the WHL final at the Keystone Centre on April 28, 1979. (Brandon Sun file photo)

Division all year. They played in tough division because New West always had a good team and Victoria had a good team too."

GREGG DRINNAN (Brandon Sun): "That Portland team was really good. Blake Wesley was a good defenceman, there was always a question whether Keith Brown or Brad McCrimmon was the best defenceman in the league that season, Florent Robidoux and Jim Dobson, they were really good. It was two really good teams and it was great hockey to watch. Neither of those organizations was goofy so you didn't have to be concerned about silly stuff happening. It was just good, hard-hitting junior hockey."

KELLY MCCRIMMON: "Ken Hodge and Brian Shaw, who were the owners of the team, would tell you that's what really put them on the map. They moved there and weren't doing great and that team was really strong and the playoffs were so good."

RAY ALLISON: "It was not only physical but they probably had the second best D in the league. They had (Keith) Brown, Bart was a good goalie and they could score with you. If you didn't check them and play both ends of the rink, they would beat you. It was tight. The difference in the whole series was probably a couple of power-play goals."

WES COULSON: "They had their top offensive guys too and they could score goals. The goaltending was pretty much on an even keel between Hunter and Knickle and Olson. Their defence was good, it was big."

RAY ALLISON: "They had size, strength. They had a good team."

MIKE PEROVICH: "It could have went either way. It was close. They came into Brandon and beat us (on Jan. 15)."

DON GILLEN: "They had a lot of good players, a lot of top draft picks so they had a swagger to them. They were good players and had a lot of confidence in themselves."

DAVE CHARTIER: "They had a chip on their shoulder for sure."

DAVE STEWART: "I had a great time playing against those guys that whole series. It was good, and everybody knew it would be. Portland wasn't that far behind us in the standings. They had some good hockey players, (Perry) Turnbull and Bart Hunter and some other guys who could put the puck in the net. I loved that series. I had no problem getting up for those games. We were so gung ho, there was no way we could lose."

GAMES 1-3

The series opened in Brandon on April 27 with the visitors



Brandon defenceman Wes Coulson is helped off the ice by athletic therapist Jack (Smockey) Stouffer and Brad McCrimmon during Game 3 of the WHL final against the Portland Winter Hawks. Coulson's shoulder kept him out of the rest of the league final, and he played hurt at the Memorial Cup. (Brandon Sun file photo)

grabbing a 4-2 victory. The next night, Brandon tied it up when Brian Propp scored the winner in the third period.

The victory came at the cost of forward Kelly McCrimmon, who fractured the same bone in his arm he had broken earlier in the season, knocking him out of the rest of the playoffs.

"It was heartbreaking at that time of the season," McCrimmon said. "It was the league final, so I missed the rest of the league final and the Memorial Cup."

On April 29, Brandon took its first series lead, but again it came at a cost. Defenceman Wes Coulson, one of the team's remaining three 19-year-old defencemen after the March injury to Mike Perovich, injured his shoulder. A few days later, the Oak River product was cleared to return for a Game 7 if it was needed — it wasn't — but he essentially played in the Memorial Cup with one arm.

That further ratcheted up the pressure on Brandon's veteran blue-liners, Brad McCrimmon and Tim Lockridge.

Still, Brandon's forwards did their part with lots of physical play.

BRANT KIESSIG: "I got Perry Turnbull's attention in Brandon. That was a good indicator. He's looking at me and I'm basically standing over him after I flattened him at the blue-line — I crushed him — and I was looking at him and he's looking at me like 'You little ... rookie piece of s—' but he realized there was nothing they could do about it. I like to use the analogy of the Rocky movies where he fought the Russian. We were the Russian. We were a machine."

DAVE CHARTIER: "We had to get some of those guys off their game and there's where some of us younger guys went after their guys and our scorers scored when they needed to."

Brandon won Games 2 and 3, sending the series back to Portland for Games 4-6.

GAME 4

"I'm not going to miss the net." I remember thinking 'I hope I don't fan on it but I'm not going to regret missing the net. When I got in, I really didn't look at the goalie (Bart Hunter) that much but I fired it low on the ice at basically the centre of the net and it went in."

STEPHEN PATRICK: "I can remember Donny's overtime goal. I asked him about it when I saw him one time and said 'I would have sworn you looked right at the left corner and not at the net, but at the rink to throw the goalie off and then you shot it and it went in.' His story is a little bit different."

GAME 6

The series resumed on May 3, and the hosts took a 3-1 lead early in the third period. But Wesley took a high-sticking major when he clipped Ray Allison on the face and the forward's nose began to bleed. Brandon scored three times during the ensuing five-minute penalty. They added a pair of insurance markers and eventually emerged WHL champions for the first time.

GREGG DRINNAN: "In the six games, you could make the argument that the deciding factor was a major penalty to Blake Wesley for his sticking Ray Allison. It was Game 6 in Portland and it was deemed a major because it drew blood."

WES COULSON: "We scored three goals, that put us ahead 4-3 and that really deflated them. They were done. If they win Game 6, then we both have to fly all the way back to Brandon for Game 7."

DAVE McDONALD: "They had a very good team. I remember winning Game 6 in Portland. We were down by two goals and they took a five-minute penalty and we got three goals. That was kind of it. You're out there on the ice and you can just cut the air with a knife it's so thick with all the people in the stands. It was a great feeling going out there and winning."

TIM LOCKRIDGE: "I remember that game. I think we all knew we were going to win, that's how confident we were about that day. I remember how excited was that everyone was that we finally won the league championship."

DAVE CHARTIER: "If Perry Turnbull hadn't have got hurt, it would have been tough to beat them. They played really well against us and we had some battles with them."

WES COULSON: "Would we have won a Game 7 back in Brandon? Who the hell knows? They were just as good as we were. Ya, we won four games to two, but they were just as good as we were. They deserved to be where they were just as much as we did."

WHL PLAYOFFS

1979 WHL PLAYOFF RESULTS

DIVISIONAL ROUND-ROBIN SEMIFINALS (Double home-and-home round-robin)

EASTERN DIVISION

- Brandon (7-1) advances.
- Saskatoon (3-5) advances.
- Edmonton (2-6) eliminated.

CENTRAL DIVISION

- Lethbridge (5-3) advances.
- Calgary (4-4) advances.
- Billings (3-5) eliminated.

WEST DIVISION

- Portland (7-1) advances.
- Victoria (3-5) advances.
- New Westminster (2-6) eliminated.

DIVISION FINALS (best-of-seven)

- Brandon 4, Saskatoon 0
- Lethbridge 4, Calgary 3
- Portland 4, Victoria 3

LEAGUE ROUND-ROBIN SEMIFINALS Home-and-home round-robin

- Brandon (3-1) advances.
- Portland (3-1) advances.
- Lethbridge (0-4) eliminated.

WHL FINAL (best-of-seven)

- Brandon 4, Portland 2

WHL AWARDS

- **Most Valuable Player:** Perry Turnbull, Portland.
- **Top Scorer:** Brian Propp, Brandon.
- **Top Defenceman:** Keith Brown, Portland.
- **Rookie of the Year:** Kelly Kisio, Calgary.
- **Top Goaltender:** Rick Knickle, Brandon.
- **Most Sportsmanlike Player:** Errol Rausse, Seattle.
- **Coach of the Year:** Dunc McCallum, Brandon.

ALL-STAR TEAMS

FIRST TEAM

- G:** Rick Knickle, Brandon.
- D:** Keith Brown, Portland.
- D:** Brad McCrimmon, Brandon.
- C:** Laurie Boschman, Brandon.
- LW:** Brian Propp, Brandon.
- RW:** Ray Allison, Brandon.

SECOND TEAM

- G:** Warren Skorodenski, Calgary.
- D:** Craig Levie, Edmonton.
- D:** Blake Wesley, Portland.
- C:** Mike Toal, Portland.
- LW:** Perry Turnbull, Portland.
- RW:** Dirk Graham, Regina.

WORK REMAINS

Naturally, the Wheat Kings celebrated their win, but they knew their work wasn't over. The Memorial Cup was set to begin four nights later in Quebec, and a bruised and battered Brandon team had to fly home. That put a damper on the night's activities.

RAY ALLISON: "I played three and a half years and I would have done anything to win the (WHL). I wanted to win the west more than I wanted anything because it was no easy road."

STEPHEN PATRICK: "It's great but you don't have a lot of time to celebrate because you have to get focused on the next thing, which is the Memorial Cup ... The two teams that should have been in the finals were in the finals so that was important. Also we beat them in Portland."

DAVE CHARTIER: "We celebrated but it wasn't a big celebration because there was lot of work to be done yet. I think we were a bunch of hyenas for a while there but we took it in stride that we won the Western Hockey League. I don't remember a whole bunch about what happened after but obviously we were pretty pumped about the whole thing."

DON GILLEN: "At the time, it was very nice to beat them, and it was nice to beat them in their own rink. Even though it would have been nice to win our rink for our own fans, it was really nice to beat them in a rink where they felt they had an extra swagger to them."

TIM LOCKRIDGE: "The toughest part of that whole playoff was the plane ride back between Portland and Brandon and back. We had that old plane and had to stop for fuel two or three times. Everybody was tired."

STEPHEN PATRICK: "I remember flying home. It was a great feeling, great for the older guys who were going into the draft, which was important."

» Tomorrow: Memorial Cup round-robin.
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