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**Great Falls Americans Press Release**

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**Americans offense dominates in 7-1 thrashing of Helena in Game 1 of Play-In Series**

**By Kevin Scott**

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GREAT FALLS, Mont., March 6, 2020 — The 2019-20 North American 3 Hockey League (NA3HL) regular season for the Frontier Division ended last Saturday (February 29<sup>th</sup>) as six of the eight Frontier teams moving on to postseason action in March.

This season, three of the four teams that made the Frontier Division Semi-Finals last season have qualified for another championship run in 2020. The #6 Helena Bighorns (17-26-2-2), the defending 2018-19 Frontier Division champions, along with the top-ranked Bozeman Ice Dogs (39-7-0-1) and the third-seeded Great Falls Americans (33-9-4-1) are back while the Missoula Junior Bruins are absent from this year's postseason. Last season, just four teams out of the then seven team league (Sheridan (WY) Hawks are the new team this year) made the playoffs. The other two Wyoming junior hockey franchises, the #4 Yellowstone Quake (Cody, WY, 19-25-2-1) and the #5 Gillette Wild (20-27-0-0) return to the playoffs after missing out last season. The second-year Butte Cobras (6-40-1) and the Missoula Junior Bruins ended their 47-game season last Saturday and hope to be back next season with a new outlook and playoff hopefuls for the 2020-21 season.



The top two seeds (Bozeman Ice Dogs and the Sheridan Hawks) both received first-round (Play-In Series) byes this week and will take on the two winning squads that will compete this week in the Play-In Series.

The #3 Great Falls Americans play host to the #6 Helena Bighorns while the #4 Yellowstone Quake will entertain their rivals from Gillette (Wild), who are ranked as the fifth seed in the best-of-three series. Great Falls bested Helena in seven of their eight meetings (7-0-1 record) including one overtime and one shootout victory in January.

Second year mentor, Greg Sears, guided his young squad to 18 wins (18-2-3) on home ice and 15 road victories (15-7-1-1). Once again, the Great Falls Americans fans packed the Great Falls Ice Plex for home

dates and led the Frontier Division by averaging 785 spectators and fourth overall in the NA3HL this season. Helena was seventh in the league and averaged 462 at the Helena Ice Arena. [Click here](#) to view the full season attendance from around the NA3HL.

Would the Great Falls Americans taste another win over the Helena Bighorns this season or would Helena find a way to get by the host team?

The Great Falls Americans added five goals in the second period to cruise to a 7-1 win over the visiting Helena Bighorns on Friday evening at the Great Falls Ice Plex during Game 1 of the best-of-three Frontier Division Play-In Series. Levi Mese, who recently received NA3HL "2<sup>nd</sup> Star" Frontier Division Star of the Week ([see story](#)) as well as an Honorable Mention for the February 2020 NA3HL Player of the Month ([see story](#)), scored two goals and Viktor Wennberg stopped 35 of the 36 shots sent his way by the Bighorns offense. Kellen Harris and Brody Boyce also played well by scoring once and dishing out two assists apiece.

The defense was tight on both ends of the ice as only one goal was successful by Great Falls after the first period. The first goal was made possible by forward Bryson Fletcher and defenseman Tommy Janes as they collected the assists on Brody Boyce's scoring drive that allowed the fans at the Great Falls Ice Plex to get loud. The shots-on-goal was 14-13 in favor of the home team. Five minor penalties were accounted for on the score sheet.

The Americans offense lit up the lamp five times as the host team led 6-0 before the second intermission. Levi Mese registered two goals while Jack Olson and Kellen Harris each answered with one. Brody Boyce scored his second in as many periods. Luke Richesin also scored for the Americans with his goal coming with 38 seconds to go in the middle stanza. Henry Chavez, Kellen Harris, Nick Torres, Jack Olson, Blake Nerney, Brody Boyce, Luke Richesin and Brandon Peterson set up the five scoring drives for coach Greg Sears' squad. There was a ten-shot difference (33-23) between the two junior hockey rivals as Great Falls took 19 of the 29 second period shot attempts.

Jake Hayes came out of the second stanza on a mission as he scored the first goal of the third period 43 seconds in. Kellen Harris and Nick Torres accrued their second assists of the night on the power play. The Bighorns prevented the shutout with under three minutes remaining as Isaac Ellingson scored with assistance from Gavgn Galloway.

Great Falls out-shot Helena in the first two periods (33-23) before each team attempted 13 shots in the final stanza.

The Americans went 2-for-4 on their power play opportunities along with nine minor penalties. Helena's only scoring drive in the third period came via a power play. The Bighorns were called for seven minor penalties during the 2-hour and 19-minute playoff contest.

Viktor Wennberg, the second-year goaltender for the Americans, had his first postseason win after making two appearances during the 2019 NA3HL Playoffs. Wennberg made 35 saves in 60 minutes. The Sweden netminder now has 22 overall victories including 21 in the regular season. Kevin Tauntman had a rough night as the Helena goalie had 39 saves but allowed five of the seven scores by Great Falls in the middle period. Tauntman went 5-2-1-1 in nine regular season appearances and had his first playoff setback on Friday evening.

**OTHER PLAYOFF ACTION:** The #4 Yellowstone Quake (Cody, WY) battled the #5 (WY) Wild for the other Play-In game series that began on Thursday, March 5<sup>th</sup> in Gillette, Wyoming. Yellowstone easily took the first game of the best-of-three series, 4-1 ([box score](#)). The second game of the series shifted to Riley Arena in Cody, Wyoming for Friday's playoff contest as the Quake looking to close out the series and advance to the Frontier Division Semi-Finals against either the #1 Bozeman Ice Dogs (39-7-0-1) or the #2 Sheridan (WY) Hawks (35-10-1-1).

Yellowstone standout Dylan Rumpke acquired two goals but it was Will Yates' goal in overtime that gave the Quake a 4-3 victory ([box score](#)) against in-state rival, Gillette (Wild) in Game 2 to win the series and advance to the Frontier Semi-Finals slated for next week. The fifth-seeded Wild finish their season with an overall record of 20-28-1-0.

After the Divisional Semi-Finals, the two remaining squads will battle it out in the Division Finals for the automatic berth in the Fraser Cup National Tournament later this month. Each round is a best-of-three format. The six-division winning squads (Central, Coastal, Frontier, South, Northeast and West) will then head to the [2020 Fraser Cup National Tournament](#) held this year in Bensenville, Illinois on March 25-29. The national tournament includes two round-robin games for each team followed by two semifinals contests and the championship.

**NOTES:** At tonight's playoff contest, the Great Falls Americans helped with a special cause. Toby's House, which is a crisis nursery committed to preventing child abuse and neglect and is months away from opening, need a helping hand from Great Falls. They partnered with the Great Falls Americans on Friday to raise money for childcare items (books and blankets, etc.) for their April 2020 opening date. Spectators to the game could bring items or a financial donation to go toward the new crisis nursery. As of Thursday, March 5<sup>th</sup>, they were still short about \$40,000. For more information, please [click here](#) for the ABC/FOX Montana story or log on to the Toby's House website by [clicking here](#).



After Game 1 concluded, the Americans presented Jack Olson, a forward from White Bear Lake, Minnesota, with the Sam "The Chief" Williamson Trophy for the Great Falls player who recorded the most points in a season (58 points, 16 goals, 42 assists). This was the fourth year that Great Falls has given out the award.

**NEXT CONTEST:** The third-ranked Great Falls Americans will look to close out the best-of-three series on Saturday evening (March 7) when they make the 90-mile trip down Interstate-15 to Montana's Capital City in Helena where the Bighorns hope to even the series. Game Two of the series starts from the Helena Ice Arena at 7:05PM and can be streamed online at the NA3HL's streaming service, [HockeyTV](#). If a third game is necessary, Great Falls will host the winner-take-all game at 5:30PM at the Great Falls Ice Plex.

To view the 2020 Playoff format and the schedule for the 2020 Fraser Cup Championship tournament, please [click here](#).

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