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Great Falls Americans Press Release

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Frontier Division Semi-Finals: Americans offense shines in 4-2 Game 1 victory

By Kevin Scott

Box Score	Game Sheet	League Scoreboard	Americans Team Statistics (Playoffs)
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GREAT FALLS, Mont., March 11, 2020 — While the rest of the North American 3 Hockey League (NA3HL) teams were finishing off their 2019-20 season last week, the Great Falls Americans (36-9-4-1) were beginning their postseason.

This season since the Frontier Division had eight teams (the most teams in one division in the NA3HL), the Frontier Division ended their season a week earlier and had two “Play-In Series” playoffs with #3 Great Falls Americans hosting the #6 Helena Bighorns (17-28-2-2) and the #4 Yellowstone (WY) Quake (21-25-2-1) having home ice against the #5 Gillette (WY) Wild (20-28-1-0). The Play-In Series was a best-of-three format. The #1 Bozeman Ice Dogs (39-7-0-1) and the #2 Sheridan (WY) Hawks (35-11-1-1) each received a bye and earned an automatic spot in the Frontier Division Semi-Finals that begin this week.

The Great Falls Americans and the Yellowstone Quake each needed just two games to advance to the Semi-Finals. Yellowstone scored four goals each in two games and claimed a 4-1 victory last Thursday in Gillette, Wyoming before coming home to Cody, Wyoming on Friday evening for a nail-biter. Each team traded goals and needed an extra period to decide a winning team. Yellowstone answered with a game-winning goal to prevent a third and decisive game on Saturday evening.

Meanwhile, the Americans of head coach Greg Sears, scored seven unanswered goals in the first two and a half periods of game one in Great Falls on Friday but a determined Helena squad denied the shutout with a late third period goal as the Americans defeated the Bighorns 7-1. Levi Mese (2 goals) and goaltender Viktor Wennberg (35 saves) each contributed to the win. The second game was on Saturday (March 7th) in Helena. Three goals were all that were needed for Great Falls to advance to the next round of the playoffs. Brody Boyce, Kellen Harris, and Dylan Olson each tallied a goal while Trever Mellen added 31 saves and recorded his third consecutive shutout in the goal. The Americans won for the ninth time this season against the Bighorns.



The Frontier Division Semi-Final round features the #3 Great Falls Americans facing the #2 Sheridan (WY) Hawks and the #4 Yellowstone (WY) Quake challenging the #1 Bozeman Ice Dogs in a best-of-three series for the right to face off in next week's Frontier Division Finals. The Yellowstone-Bozeman series won't begin until Friday evening with Game 1 in Cody, WY.

The Americans haven't had many losses this season (14 to be exact) but they haven't had much luck getting a win against the newest member of the North American Hockey League's (NA3HL) Frontier Division, the Sheridan Hawks. The #3 squad in the Frontier Division is 2-2-2-1 this season against the Wyoming team. A total of 36 goals were accumulated in six meetings this season with the Hawks having scored 21 of them.

Great Falls was looking for just their second victory against the Hawks on Wednesday night.

The #3 Great Falls Americans raced out to a 3-1 advantage after two periods and found a way to upset the #2 Sheridan (WY) Hawks, 4-2 during Game 1 of the NA3HL Frontier Division Semi-Final action on Wednesday at the Great Falls Ice Plex as 674 spectators watched the Americans pick up just their second win against the Wyoming club this season. Forwards Bryson Fletcher, Kellen Harris, Jack Olson and Harley Nyhuis each gathered one goal and one assist in the Americans 36th win of the season. Goaltender Viktor Wennberg swatted away 24 of 26 shots produced by Sheridan's offense.

Three goals were scored in the opening twelve minutes of the first stanza. The Great Falls Americans accrued the first goal four minutes into Game 1 off a power play. Forward Bryson Fletcher got the puck through Sheridan netminder James Downie to give the home crowd something to cheer about. Brody Boyce had his third assist of the playoffs while Harley Nyhuis added his second. Great Falls led by a single goal for a few minutes before Great Falls goaltender Viktor Wennberg was caught off guard as he attempted to swat away the puck but forward Logan Syrup's feed from teammate Kolten Wright evened the contest. The Americans took advantage of their second power play opportunity when Jack Olson, the team leader in points this season, put the puck in the net with Jake Hayes (second playoff assist) and Kellen Harris (third playoff assist) assisting. The home team limited the Hawks offense to just six shots. Great Falls made 15 attempts.

The second period was quiet for the first fifteen minutes before Kellen Harris tallied his first goal (3rd overall in the playoffs on a wild play that seemed to go off a Hawks player and into the net. Jack Olson was credited with the assist. There was a ten-shot difference (30-20) after the middle stanza with Great Falls registering 15 shots in the period and Sheridan attempted 14 shots with no successful shot opportunities before the second intermission.

The Americans struck first in the final period of regulation. Harley Nyhuis, playing in his first season with Great Falls, lit up the lamp five minutes into the stanza for his first playoff score with assistance from Bryson Fletcher and Brody Boyce. Boyce captured his fourth assist and Fletcher produced his third in the postseason. Alex Kesler's slapshot with 7:40 remaining sailed by Americans goaltender Viktor Wennberg for the Hawks second score of the night. The Alaska defenseman cut the Hawks deficit to 4-2 on the unassisted scoring play but they would get no closer despite many shots by the visiting team in the final minutes.

Great Falls out-shot Sheridan in each of three periods including 11 in the third to end the game with 41. The Hawks offense accumulated 14 of their 26 in the second period.

The first game of the division semi-finals had the host team capitalize on two of their six power play chances. Great Falls received just two minor penalties with four minutes spent in the penalty box. Seven of the Hawks eight infractions that the NA3HL officials called on them were minor and they had one major unsportsmanlike conduct penalty assessed to them in the third frame. Sheridan spent 24 minutes in the sin bin.

Viktor Wennberg achieved his second playoff victory this season including a 7-1 home win against the Helena Bighorns in Game 1 of the Frontier Division Play-In Series last week. He generated 24 saves on the night that resulted in his 23rd overall victory in 29 appearances. James Downie had a tough night between the pipes for Sheridan. The Australian goaltender obtained 37 saves but allowed at least one goal in each period in his first playoff contest with the Hawks. He has so far won 18 games including two games (2-2) with the NA3HL's Louisiana Drillers where he began the 2019-20 season

NOTES: To get as many fans as possible packed into the Great Falls Ice Plex, ABC/FOX Montana, a proud sponsor of the Great Falls Americans, gave away FREE tickets during the day on Wednesday (March 11th). Fans just had to pick up the tickets at the Great Falls television station during normal business hours (8AM-5PM).

[Click here](#) to view the playoff pairings and schedule in the chase for the 2020 Fraser Cup Championship taking place at the end of March in Bensenville, Illinois with the six division champions squaring off to declare a national champion.

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

NOTE: After having 41 wins in his first season behind the bench for the Great Falls Americans, Great Falls Americans second-year coach Greg Sears finished the 2019-20 season with 36 victories. The Americans ended their campaign with a 33-9-4-1 regular season record and 3-0 in postseason play (36-9-4-1) and advanced to the Frontier Division Semi-Finals where they defeated the Sheridan (WY) Hawks 4-2 in the first game before the NA3HL cancelled the rest of the playoffs due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

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