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**Great Falls Americans Press Release**

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**Bighorns top Americans 7-2 in season finale**

**By Kevin Scott**

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HELENA, Mont., February 27, 2022 — Most of the 34 teams that make up the five-division North American 3 Hockey League (NA3HL) don't conclude their 2021-22 regular junior hockey season until March 6<sup>th</sup>, but for the Frontier Division the season ends on Monday, February 28<sup>th</sup> when the playoff bound Bozeman Ice Dogs (24-17-3-1, 3<sup>rd</sup> in Frontier, 52 pts.) travel to Cody, Wyoming for a makeup game against the Yellowstone Quake, who will call it a season after that but Bozeman will move on to the postseason.

For the Great Falls Americans, (21-20-3-2, 4<sup>th</sup> in Frontier, 49 pts.), they finished off the regular season with a road game against the top-ranked Helena Bighorns (42-3-2-0, 1<sup>st</sup> in Frontier, 86 pts.), who won the regular season title this year, on Sunday afternoon in Helena, Montana.

Both Helena and Great Falls have each qualified for postseason play. The difference will be that the #1 Helena Bighorns will sit idle this week as they earned a bye in the opening round (Play-In Series) along with #2 Gillette (WY) Wild (4-4-2-0, 2<sup>nd</sup> in Frontier, 84 pts.). Both squads will have home-ice advantage for the NA3HL Frontier Divisional Semi-Finals that will begin during the second week of March. The Americans will have a quick turn around as they will leave Wednesday for Rapid City, South Dakota to face the newest member of the Frontier Division this season, the Badlands Sabres (19-25-2-1, 5<sup>th</sup> in Frontier, 41 pts.) in a best-of-three NA3HL Play-In Series. The Americans and Sabres are set to do battle on the ice on Thursday, March 3 in South Dakota before traveling back to Great Falls, Montana for Game 2 slated to start on Saturday, March 5<sup>th</sup>. If a third (and deciding) game is necessary, the Americans will host that contest on Sunday (March 6<sup>th</sup>) as well at the Great Falls Ice Plex.

In addition to Helena, Gillette, Bozeman, Great Falls and Badlands, the sixth and final piece of the Frontier playoffs went to the Butte Cobras (19-26-2-0, 6<sup>th</sup> in Frontier, 40 pts.), who are guided by former Great Falls Americans assistant coach Kirk Golden. Another former assistant coach from Americans head coach Greg Sears staff is Gillette head mentor Ethan Hayes. Meanwhile, the #7 Yellowstone (WY) Quake and the #8 Sheridan (WY) Hawks will be back next season.

But first things first, the Americans and Bighorns met for the eighth and final time this season on Sunday with Helena getting the best of Great Falls in seven of eight meetings this season. Great Falls' only win came on January 28<sup>th</sup> where they picked up their 20<sup>th</sup> win by escaping Helena's offensive attack, 3-2 ([game story](#)).

The trio of TJ Norris, Harlan Wojtusik, and Johnathan Peterson led the #1 Helena Bighorns to an easy 7-2 victory over the #4 Great Falls Americans during Sunday afternoon's regular season finale for both squads.

During the first 13 minutes of action between these two rivals, the host team had three successful scoring drives from three different players. Nick Cofer, Gavyn Galloway, and TJ Norris each added a goal to their resume. TJ Norris, Ian Vannelli, Harlan Wojtusik, Logan Matheny, Johnathan Peterson, and Nick Cofer assisted on three-score lead by the Bighorns. Micah Serino managed to find the back of the net before the period expired to cut the deficit to 3-1. Serino, one of the standout players for Great Falls, scored of the first of two power play opportunities with four minutes remaining thanks to assistance from Hunter Maschke and Silas Hughes. There was a 21-shot difference (32-11) in favor of the Bighorns as both teams headed to the locker room.

Helena took back their three-goal advantage 68 seconds into the middle period with a goal by former Missoula Junior Bruins forward Liam Bland, who joined the team this season when the Missoula team moved to Rapid City, South Dakota (Badlands Sabres). Tylor Greene and Johnathan Peterson, two returning players for Helena from last season, created the assists for Helena's fourth goal. Helena, coached by Damon Hanson, would gather one more tally in the stanza when Harlan Wojtusik and Gavyn Galloway got the puck to an open Johnathan Peterson for his ninth goal of the season. For the second consecutive period, Helena allowed Great Falls to attempt just 11 shots-on-goal while they finished with 23.

The visitors would produce their second goal when Daniel Crutcher scored his 17<sup>th</sup> and final regular season goal for the Americans four minutes into the final period. Hunter Maschke collected his second assist while Riley Opperude registered his first while Great Falls capitalized on their second power play of the day. The Americans would not get any closer than 5-2 as Helena tasted their 42<sup>nd</sup> win of the season by adding two final goals by Harlan Wojtusik and TJ Norris to round out the scoring. Johnathan Peterson accrued his third assist and Logan Matheny and Tylor Greene each accumulated their second (assist). Erik Gibboney also contributed one assist on the second and final goal that was made while the Americans were in the penalty box.

The 47<sup>th</sup> game of the season for each team saw Helena pepper Great Falls with 66 of the 103 total shots-on-goal.

Eleven combined minor penalties were called by the league officials in a game that 1,541 spectators in attendance at the Helena Ice Arena for the final regular season game. Both of Great Falls' scores came on the power play as they went 2-for-5. The final two goals in the third frame by the home team were made possible by an Americans penalty.

Johnathan Peterson led both teams in points scored with four (1 goal, 3 assists) and TJ Norris (2 goals, 1 assist) and Harlan Wojtusik (1 goal, 2 assists) each had three points for the winning side. Daniel Crutcher and Micah Serino scored the two goals and Hunter Maschke earned two assists for Great Falls.

Helena native Gabe Swanson won his second game in four appearances and closed the regular season in the net for Helena with a 2-1-0-0 record while redirecting 35 of the 37 shots. Ben Winkler (4-4-1-0) got the start for the first time since January 22<sup>nd</sup> and suffered his fifth loss of the season. Winkler had 59 saves in his tenth game for Great Falls this season.

Great Falls won eleven home and away games this season by compiling a 11-5-0-1 record inside the Great Falls Ice Plex and a 11-15-3-1 on the road as they finished the season (22-20-3-2) in fourth place among the eight-team Frontier Division. Fans can view all of the 2021-22 regular and playoff season results and game summaries by [clicking here](#).

**NOTES:** A big thanks to photographer Dustin Bauer for taking photos this season and for creating a YouTube highlight video of the Americans games this weekend against the Yellowstone Quake. Fans can view the photos and the YouTube video in the [photo gallery](#).

**NEXT CONTEST:** #4 Great Falls already knows they will meet the #5 Badlands Sabres in the first round (Play-In Series) of the 2022 NA3HL Playoffs this week. The Americans will travel to Rapid City, South Dakota on Thursday, March 3<sup>rd</sup> for Game 1 of the best-of-three series starting at 7:05PM (MST). The Americans will make the trip back to Great Falls on Friday and play host to Game 2 on Saturday, March 5<sup>th</sup> with the puck set to drop at 8:00PM (MST). If a third and decisive Game 3 is necessary, the Americans and Sabres will tangle on the ice for a winner-take-all contest starting at 6:00PM (MST) on Sunday, March 6<sup>th</sup>. All postseason coverage can be found on [HockeyTV](#).

In the other Play-In Series, the #3 Bozeman Ice Dogs will meet the #6 Butte Cobras with the winner of the best-of-three series advancing to the 2022 Frontier Division Semi-Finals where they will either face the #1 Helena Bighorns or the #2 Gillette (WY) Wild. Bozeman and Butte will start Game 1 in Bozeman, Montana on Friday, March 4 and then play Game 2 at the Butte Community Ice Center on Saturday, March 5. Both games will start at 7:30PM (MST). If a Game 3 is necessary, the series will shift back to Bozeman's Haynes Pavilion for a 4:00PM (MST) start on Sunday, March 6<sup>th</sup>.

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