

A Rebel with a cause

Nugent-Hopkins scores game-winner against Oil Kings

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Ryan Nugent-Hopkins rifles home the game-winner past Jon Groenheyde late in the third period.

Photograph by: Brian Gavriloff , The Journal

RED DEER – Ryan Nugent-Hopkins showed why he's a potential No. 1 pick in the 2011 NHL entry draft.

Nugent-Hopkins scored the game-winning goal with 5:35 remaining in the third period and added an insurance marker on the power play 66 seconds later to give the Red Deer Rebels a 5-3 victory over the Edmonton Oil Kings in the first game of a best-of-seven Western Hockey League playoff series Friday at Enmax Centrium.

Game 2 in the Eastern Conference showdown is 7:30 p.m. Saturday at Red Deer.

"You give Nugent-Hopkins an inch and he's going to take a mile," said Oil Kings head coach Derek Laxdal. "He was the difference in the game tonight with two goals and a couple of assists."

On his first goal, Nugent-Hopkins, 17, was wide open in the slot when he received a pass from Slovakian Andrej Kudrna, who squeezed past Oil Kings defenceman Adrain Van de Mosselaer along the boards. Nugent-Hopkins buried his shot on sprawling Oil Kings goalie Jon Groenheyde.

"On the first one, he just battled back after getting hit and just made the second effort and found me on the back door. It was a really nice feed there," Nugent-Hopkins said about Kudrna, who also scored to give the Rebels a 3-2 lead with 11:40 remaining in the third period.

Michael St. Croix tied the game 3-3 less than three minutes after Kudrna's goal when Kristians Pelss, from the seat of his pants, fed a pass to St. Croix, who promptly roofed it over the glove of Rebels goaltender Darcy Kuemper.

Ryan Dech had the first good scoring chance of the game when the Oil Kings defenceman took a behind-the-net feed from Jordan Hickmott but failed to get good wood on the shot and fired the puck wide.

Less than a minute later, with Pelss in the penalty box, Red Deer opened the scoring when Byron Froese blasted a one-timer past Groenheyde. Brett Ferguson upped the lead to 2-0 before the end of the period.

But the Oil Kings battled back with goals by Keegan Lowe, in the first period, and Cam Abney, in the second, to even the score after 40 minutes.

Edmonton dominated the second period as Red Deer was sloppy with the puck. The Oil Kings constantly applied pressure on Kuemper, peppering him with 19 shots in the middle stanza. But the Oil Kings couldn't sustain that momentum throughout the third period.

"We had them 3-3 late in the game and we made a little bit of a mistake there and they capitalized on it," Laxdal said. "You've got to give our kids credit. They came out and battled and, for a lot of them, that was their first playoff experience and they played a hard game."

The series was expected to be physical and Game 1 lived up to the billing. On the first shift Rebels captain Colin Archer drilled Oil Kings captain Mark Pysyk into the boards. Pysyk left the ice briefly.

A few seconds later - 32 seconds after the opening puck drop - a scrum ensued in front of the Red Deer net between Lowe and Red Deer's Mathew Dumba after Kuemper gave T.J. Foster a forearm to the chops.

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