

Oil Kings tackle almost impossible dream

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The 1995-96 Spokane Chiefs are the only Western Hockey League team to come back from a 3-0 playoff series deficit when they knocked off the Portland Winterhawks in the quarter-finals.

The Edmonton Oil Kings are looking to replicate that feat against the Red Deer Rebels, starting with Game 4 Thursday at Rexall Place.

Daulton Siwak's fluke goal with 1:52 remaining in the third period gave the Rebels a 3-1 win and a 3-0 series lead on Monday. Despite the tough task ahead of them, Oil Kings bench boss Derek Laxdal said Wednesday the series could be a lot different.

"We can't forget we're playing the fifth-ranked team in the nation here. They're ranked pretty high, but we easily could be up 2-1 if we had a couple bounces and breaks," he said.

The Oil Kings have been close in two of the three games. Game 1 was tied 3-3 until Ryan Nugent-Hopkins scored two goals late in the third period to give the Rebels a 5-3 win, and Red Deer capitalized on undisciplined penalties by Edmonton to record a 5-1 victory in Game 2.

But the big problem for the Oil Kings has been their inability to get the job done with the man advantage. Laxdal's squad has gone 0-for-12 on the power play through the first three games, and 1-for-41 if the regular season numbers against Red Deer are included.

"The biggest thing for us is we've got to score on the power play. We had a five-on-three the other night early in the game and we had a couple good looks, but (Red Deer goalie Darcy) Kuemper made a great save off T.J. Foster," Laxdal said. "If we score early in the game, we gain that confidence."

Conversely, Red Deer has capitalized when it has had a man advantage. The Rebels scored on 22 per cent of their power-play chances during the regular season, but are clicking at 28 per cent in the playoffs.

Not only are the Oil Kings struggling to score on the power play, they are struggling to score at even-strength as well, having tallied only five goals in three games.

According to Laxdal, there needs to be more traffic in front of Kuemper and that's only going to come by scrapping for every inch of ice.

"We've got to find a way to get to the front on Kuemper and manufacture some goals through hard work and just going to those hard areas," Laxdal said.

Edmonton captain Mark Pysyk could be playing his last game in an Oil Kings uniform if the Rebels sweep the series, but he said that isn't his focus.

"I haven't really thought about that," Pysyk said. "I think no one is really planning on losing. We're planning on winning and keeping it going here."

Like Laxdal, Pysyk thinks the series has been close enough that the Oil Kings could be up instead of down.

"I think all three of the games could have gone either way," Pysyk said.

Although their backs are up against the wall and there is no pressure on the Oil Kings, Laxdal said the whole team has to bring that extra 10 per cent to the rink for Game 4.

"The first game is the hardest game to win in a series and the fourth game is the hardest win to close out," Laxdal said. "(Tonight), we have to be our best."

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