

Rebels hold on to beat Oil Kings, lock up title

Central Division rivals engage in physical affair,
likely to meet in Round 1 of WHL playoffs

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Published: Saturday, March 19, 2011



Edmonton Oil Kings winger Cam Abney, left, mixes it up with Red Deer Rebels' Andrej Kudrna at Rexall Place on Friday.

Photograph by: Shaughn Butts , The Journal

Fists were flying, bodies were slamming into the boards and the intensity level was extremely high at Rexall Place on Friday night.

Unfortunately, the Edmonton Oil Kings concluded their regular-season home schedule the same way they opened it, with a 4-3 loss to Ryan Nugent-Hopkins and the Red Deer Rebels.

There was a playoff buzz in the air and with the Western Hockey League playoffs just around the corner, the two teams appear destined to meet in Round 1. If they do meet, expect the series to be even and physically tough just like Friday's game.

The Oil Kings and Rebels don't like each other and that was evident early on in their fifth meeting of the season. The fists started flying 2: 22 into the game when Oil Kings defenceman Ryan Dench exchanged knuckle sandwiches with Rebels forward Locke Muller.

At 5:48 of the first, Rebels captain Colin Archer took offence to an open-ice hit delivered by Edmonton defenceman Keegan Lowe on John Persson. Archer and Lowe squared off, but Archer quickly jerseyed Lowe and scored the takedown.

The fights seemed to inspire the Oil Kings because just 41 seconds later Travis Ewanyk played the puck off the left boards to himself and fired a snap shot over the glove of Rebels goalie Darcy Kuemper to put the home side up 1-0.

Fourteen seconds later, and for the third time in a span of 4:12, a fight broke out. This time the combatants were Edmonton's Cole Stephenson and Red Deer's Turner Elson. Stephenson landed a few good shots before taking Elson to the ice.

Although Stephenson won the fight, the Rebels were the ones who soon had springs in their skates. At the 8:57 mark, and with the Rebels on the power play, Nugent-Hopkins -a potential pick by the Oilers in the 2011 NHL entry draft -threaded a cross-ice pass to Byron Froese and the centreman beat Laurent Brossoit for the tying goal.

Nugent-Hopkins, the game's second star, added to his assist a few minutes later when he fired a one-timer past Brossoit to give the Rebels a 2-1 lead. He sits third in WHL scoring with 104 points.

Archer and Froese added goals in the second and third respectively to extend Red Deer's lead to three goals and it looked like the Rebels were going to cruise to victory.

The Oil Kings, however, continued pressing and third-period goals by T.J. Foster and Dylan Wruck drew them closer. They continued to pepper Kuemper with shots and crash the crease, but the Rebels hung on despite a feverish push from Edmonton.

With the win, the Rebels lock up the Central Division title and the No. 2 seed in the Eastern Conference playoffs.

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