
Kitchener Rangers to open playoffs versus Sarnia Sting

James Rowe;reporter;

After a 47-17-4 regular season, the Kitchener Rangers open the Ontario Hockey League playoffs with a best of seven first round series against the Sarnia Sting.

The Rangers finished second in the Midwest Division and third in the Western Conference in the regular season.

Sarnia comes in as the sixth seed in the conference after a 34-24-10 season.

Kitchener is coming off of a 3-2 road loss against the Plymouth Whalers on Saturday, March 17. The loss snapped the team's eight game winning streak.

The two squads met four times in the regular season with the Rangers coming out on top in three of the four meetings. The two teams last met on January 19, with Kitchener winning 3-1.

The Rangers will be led offensively by two-time World Junior Championship Gold Medalist Steve Downie.

Acquired midway through the season, Downie registered 32 points in just 17 games with Kitchener.

Along with being looked to for scoring and energy, Downie will also provide leadership and experience, having been to the Memorial Cup last season as a member of the OHL Champion Peterborough Petes.

Other leading scorers who will need to produce for the Rangers to have an extended playoff run include Peter Tsimikalis (56 points in only 37 games), Justin Azevedo and the team's two leading goalscorers, Matt Halischuk and Kevin Henderson, who had 33 apiece.

Kitchener is anchored on defence by veteran Jakub Kindl. The Detroit Red Wings made Kindl the 19th selection in the 2005 NHL Entry Draft and in his third season with the Rangers the young man from the Czech Republic had 55 points in 54 games.

Perhaps the biggest surprise of the season for the Rangers has been the play of goaltender John Murray. After being passed over in the last two NHL drafts Murray is ranked as one of the top goaltenders in this June's draft.

This season he compiled a 40-9-3 record with five shutouts, a 2.58 goals against average and a 0.909 save percentage.

Murray will face a Sting lineup that was led in scoring by Steven Stamkos. Stamkos put up 92 points in 63 games this season and the Rangers will have to slow him down to be successful.

Also scoring well over a point per game this season were Harrison Reid, Trevor Kell, and Ryan Wilson. That trio, along with Stamkos, will be interesting to watch against the Rangers who allowed the second fewest goals against in the entire league this season.

In net Sarnia will likely go with Peter VanBuskirk. The teenager from Windsor was 25-13-6 during the season with two shutouts. He had a 3.28 goals against average and 0.901 save percentage.

The other first round matchups in the Western Conference are London-Owen Sound, Plymouth-Guelph and Saginaw-Sault Ste. Marie.

The Rangers-Sting series was to get underway Thursday, March 22 with game one. Results were unavailable at press time.

The next Rangers home game will be game three, which is set for Sunday, March 25, at the Kitchener Memorial Auditorium. Game time is 7:00 p.m.

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