

## Firebirds 2024-2025 Season Wrap Up

All good things come to an end. The Firebirds quest to reach the Calder Cup finals for a 3<sup>rd</sup> season ended in round 2 this year. Since the AHL is a development league to the NHL, the veterans rule came into effect, and the Firebirds had a much younger team this season. To their credit, the Kraken organization drafted really well. All the rookies stepped up to play and exceeded expectations. Players grew before our eyes and a few made their NHL debuts. Over all, the year was a real success.

In the season exit interviews, every player lamented not going further in the playoffs, but they were very happy with the whole season. The biggest effect was the trade deadline. There were call ups and injuries after the trade deadline that became a tall order to overcome. Regardless, the team played competitive to the end. At the beginning of the season, no one would be faulted for thinking the Firebirds would struggle to get a playoff spot. The fact that they made it to the 2<sup>nd</sup> round with a younger group is impressive. A closer look, the Firebirds really lost to the Vancouver Canucks and not the Abbotsford Canucks. Most of Abbotsford team has had multiple seasons in the NHL and AHL. The games were close speaks to the Firebirds player development and competitive spirit where the Canucks with veterans look vulnerable, had puck luck, and couldn't blow out the younger Firebirds. To hit the point home, the Vancouver Canucks were not able to make the playoffs, and their head coach walking away at the end of the season. This allowed players on the Vancouver Canucks who fit under the AHL development and veteran rules to play for Abbotsford. The Firebirds had a better team if it wasn't for injuries.

### Final Playoff Stats

Here are the final Firebirds playoff stats

No.	PLAYER	POS	GP	G	A	PTS	+/-	PPG	PMPPG
67	Mitchell Stephens	F	2	3	0	3	2	1.5	2.5
15	John Hayden	F	6	2	1	3	0	0.500	0.500
63	Jacob Melanson	F	6	1	2	3	0	0.500	0.500
39	Ben Meyers	F	6	1	2	3	-2	0.500	0.167
57	* Jagger Firkus	F	6	0	3	3	2	0.500	0.833
96	Logan Morrison	F	6	0	3	3	0	0.500	0.500
27	Ryan Winterton	F	4	2	0	2	-1	0.500	0.250
11	Brandon Biro	F	5	1	1	2	0	0.400	0.400
36	Ville Ottavainen	D	6	0	2	2	2	0.333	0.667
58	Max Lajoie	D	6	1	0	1	1	0.167	0.333
24	* Ty Nelson	D	6	1	0	1	0	0.167	0.167
23	Gustav Olofsson	D	6	1	0	1	0	0.167	0.167
20	Ryan Jones	D	3	0	1	1	-2	0.333	-0.333
90	Nathan Villeneuve	F	3	0	1	1	1	0.333	0.667
88	* David Goyette	F	4	0	1	1	0	0.250	0.250
16	Nikolas Brouillard	D	6	0	1	1	-1	0.167	0.000
10	Luke Henman	F	6	0	1	1	2	0.167	0.500

33	* Jani Nyman	F	6	0	1	1	-5	0.167	-0.667
70	Andrei Loshko	F	1	0	0	0	-1	0.000	-1.000
74	Carson Rehkopf	F	1	0	0	0	-1	0.000	-1.000
8	Cale Fleury	D	3	0	0	0	-1	0.000	-0.333
62	Tucker Robertson	F	3	0	0	0	0	0.000	0.000
12	* Eduard Šalé	F	3	0	0	0	-1	0.000	-0.333
21	Ian McKinnon	F	4	0	0	0	-1	0.000	-0.250
35	* Nikke Kokko	G	6	0	0	0	0	0.000	0.000

Mitchell Stephens was the hot player in the Calgary series, but an injury at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> game forced him miss the Abbotsford series. Cale Fleury also had an injury that sidelined him for a few games. With Max McCormick and Lleyton Roed not able to play, the Firebirds didn't have all the weapons.

Special teams tell the bigger story. Last year's team went 10 for 61 on the power play. This year's team in the 2 series played was 0 for 17. Any power play goal could have changed the team's fortunes. The poor power play results are something of a theme. Going back to final series against the Hershey Bears in last year's playoffs, the Firebirds are a combined 1 for 35 on the power play in their last 3 playoff series. Again, two different Firebird teams, but the trend is not positive. Power play struggles was also an Achilles heels for the Kraken. The power play has to be addressed at both levels for next season. The penalty kill is a different story. The Firebirds during the season was one of the top teams on then penalty kill. The trend continued in the playoffs. The Firebirds were 14 for 15 on the penalty kill. Of course, the one goal allowed was in game 4 against the Canucks that the Firebirds couldn't overcome.

### **ECHL – Kansas City Mavericks**

Although the Firebirds playoff run has come to an end, the goal of building a winning organization is still alive and well. The Kansas City Mavericks continue to their playoff run. They have reached the Western Conference finals. They will face the Toledo Walleye in the best of 7 series starting May 15<sup>th</sup>. Firebird fans will recognize some familiar names. Charlie Wright, Cade Borchardt, and Jack LaFontaine spent some time with the Firebirds this season.

### **A Summer of Changes**

The Kraken letting Head Coach Dan Bylsma go after just 1 season was a shock. Ron Francis was move from the GM role to the team president. With so many young players drafted and coached by this leadership team, it is not clear why the changes were made. If the Las Vegas team's success was used as a measuring stick, it would be a challenging comparison. As one sports analysts expressed, most new teams entering the league spend years development a winning organization. The Los Angeles Kings entered in 1967. They made it to their first Stanley Cup final in 1993, and finally won the Stanley Cup in 2012. Las Vegas was the only expansion team in 2016, and the first in the previous 16 years. As the first professional sports team in Las Vegas, the NHL allowed Las Vegas to stack the team with star players in order to make sure they were a success. Whatever the reasoning, the Kraken need to hire a new head coach and add the necessary pieces to build a team to make the playoffs. They have several draft picks available so we will wait to see what happens.

Change is constant in the AHL. Several of the Firebird veteran players are unrestricted free agents (UFA). No one in the exit interviews can say for sure where they will land. Some of the young Firebirds we watched this season might move up to the Kraken next season. Other past draft picks will be arriving. Carson Rehkopf, Victor Ostman, Oscar Fisker Mølgaard, Andrei Loshko, Justin Janicke, Nathan Villeneuve, and a few others made their debuts with the Firebirds. We wait to see what the summer transactions take place.

### **Firebird Fans and Coachella Valley Love**

There was a constant theme in the player exit interviews. Each player loves playing in Coachella Valley. With so much to do like golf and other outdoor activities, the players use their day's off to decompress from hockey and do some team building. They mentioned that other players in the league would like to play here. The Firebirds are becoming the gold standard. They praised the fans for the support. Filling up the arena and brining the energy helps the players feel what it is going to be like when they move up to the NHL. The biggest thing the players appreciate is being recognized in the community. The Firebirds bumper stickers, signs, and banners throughout the valley is something that don't see in other hockey cities and makes them feel welcome.

My final Firebirds report for this season comes to an end. The best way to close out is to steal a line we hear every night: until next season, stay Fired Up!

Please see the Firebirds' YouTube channel for the final interviews: [Firebirds - YouTube](#)