

STOCKTON THUNDER:

The New Hockey Team and Arena

by Kimberly Horg



Stockton will soon hear the sound of thunder in its new arena. For the first time The Stockton Hockey Franchise Group, Inc. of the East Coast Hockey League (ECHL) will introduce the Stockton Thunder to the valley.

The team and the arena are currently under construction and even though the 10,000 seat arena is not expected to be completed until December, the team will be up and skating this fall. It will play its' first regular season game against the Fresno Falcons at the Save Mart Center in Fresno on October 22, 2005. The first

The Thunder will begin its season with a 13-game road trip, (the longest starting road stretch in the ECHL) including a Thanksgiving Day game in Salt Lake City and a trip back East where they will take on the Salmon Kings in Victoria, British Columbia. They will play games in Pennsylvania and Ohio and, in January, the team will travel over 3,500 miles to Anchorage to take on the Pacific Division Champion Alaska Aces.

During the season, the Thunder will go up against California teams 27 times

Each ECHL team can reserve the rights of a maximum of eight players on a team of 18 to 20 from the season-ending list by extending a qualifying offer by July 1.

Stockton Hockey Team Owner Michael Reinsdorf bought the Atlantic City Franchise and in July, the Stockton Thunder extended qualifying offers to five members of the former Atlantic City Boardwalk Bullies, reserving rights to those players for the 2005-2006 season. The players protected by Stockton are last year's starting goalie for Atlantic City, Jake Moreland, a member of the 2005 All-Star team, Derek Edwardson, Jason Notermann (left wing), Dave Reid (defense man) and Shawn Mather (center), the only veteran among the qualified players protected by the Thunder.

Cichocki could have extended offers to eight former Bullies but said he only wanted those five players.

"A player has to have a certain level of skill, determination, character and probably the most important thing I look for is hard work and dedication. I wasn't the most talented of players but I worked really hard and never gave up and I am looking for guys who play the same way," Cichocki said.

The native of Warren, MI, has over seven years of coaching experience in the IHL and ECHL, including four years as a head coach in the ECHL with a record of 127-122-39 and two playoffs while on the Arkansas RiverBlades. Cichoki began his coaching career in 1997, as an assistant coach with the Cincinnati Cyclones of the IHL. Prior to that, he played 12 seasons of professional hockey as a forward including stints with the Detroit Red Wings and New Jersey Devils of the NHL.

"The combination of his long playing career, including time in the National



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home game will also be against Fresno on December 3 in the new Stockton Arena downtown.

In addition to its' home games, the Thunder and Fresno Falcons will play each other six more times during the season, three games in Fresno and three in Stockton.

"The Falcons are the closest team to us so we are cross-advertising with the team," Stockton Hockey Franchise Group President, Dan Chapman, said. "Our ticket base is San Joaquin County but we are reaching out to fans in every direction, as far as San Jose and San Francisco to Sacramento and Fresno."

He says the community has shown a great amount of enthusiasm for the new team and arena. The first day tickets went on sale, 657 were sold in a single day and since that time the number has exceeded and skyrocketed to 1,400.

during the 72-game season. The team will play the Bakersfield Condors four times in Bakersfield and four times in Stockton, the San Diego Gulls and Long Beach Ice Dogs three times on the road. The Gulls will visit Stockton three times and the Ice Dogs will come to Stockton twice.

The Thunder's second longest tour of the season will be in March when it plays eight games on the road starting on March 7 in Phoenix and ending on March 21 in Bakersfield.

Cichoki is currently in the recruiting process, working with player agents and with high-level junior players. He says there is a lot of trading taking place right now and signing team members is competitive because he is competing with the United and Central Hockey Leagues. The ECHL has the highest connections with the National Hockey League (NHL) so it is ranked the highest of the three.

Continued on page 43

Stockton Thunder cont.

Continued from pg. 24

Hockey League, and his experience as a head coach in the ECHL assures us that Chris is the perfect man for the job," Chapman said.

Cichoki says he is honored to be chosen as the first head coach in Stockton hockey history, adding that the amount of support the community has already given is overwhelming.

"I am not accustomed to this much support from the community. At other coaching jobs, I wondered, after every season if there would be another," he said. "I don't think I have to worry about that here because this is a stable situation. The team is going to be big and have a lot of success."

According to Stockton Hockey Community Relations Manager, Brenda Bryant, the team plans on giving back to the community. There are several different programs that are in the works including highlighting different local organizations at the home games, beginning hockey lessons open to all ages, the student achievement program in which good attendance and grades will be rewarded with free tickets and some of the players will visit local schools.

"Children look up to people in sports so we have a responsibility to the community," Bryant said. "We feel the team should use its influence to advocate positive activities."

The Stockton City Council funded the north shore redevelopment project, which is not only the construction of the arena but also a 5,000 seat baseball stadium, a 200 room hotel with conference room, a parking facility and retail locations.

The ECHL opens its 18th season on October 21 with 27 teams in 16 states and British Columbia. The regular season ends on April 8.

The Thunder will strike 27 of its 36 home games on a Friday, Saturday, or Sunday. Tentative start times for home games have been set at 4 p.m. for Sunday games and 7 p.m. for the other days.

The California Cougars have drafted players and held open tryouts. Now they are weeks away from their first training camp. Scheduled to open on October 3, camp will take place in Turlock at the town's indoor soccer facility.

For more information, to buy season tickets or merchandise for the Stockton Thunder, call 948-3322 or visit www.stocktonprohockey.com. vvm