

## Firebirds 2024-2025 Season Stats Report

With a season and a half complete, the experience of covering Firebirds home games in my statistician contract role has been interesting. The role requires me to record live game play, player count, penalties, goals, game stop, etc. I have to pay close attention to what is going on the ice. I started this role halfway through the 2023-2024 season. Watching hockey as a fan is one thing, but the role of covering hockey had a learning curve. There was also the eye-opening experience of seeing all the elements that go into putting on a sporting event, which is a different story. As the half season went into the playoffs, I noticed the style of play was different, and I began to see the little things that go on in a hockey game. For the 2024-2025 season, I decided to look a little deeper. In this season end report, I will present final player results with a discussion on analytics, and discuss my recording of faceoffs, icing, and offsides.

### Player Stats and Exploring Hockey Analytics

Rather than just list the final season statistics and note the leaders, I explored the ideas of hockey analytics earlier in the season. Sport statistics act as a record of time. Baseball was my favorite sport growing up. Baseball is all about the stats. The goal of the baseball is to get the game over to record the numbers. Batting average, hits, home runs, wins-loses, strikeouts, and ERA was information on all the baseball cards I collected as a kid. The movie *Money Ball* presented the modern baseball statistics or approach to finding baseball players to give the most bang-for-the-buck. The movie was about the 2002 Oakland As, and their use of Sabermetrics to build a team on the cheap to compete against the teams with deeper pockets. They used the overlooked stat of on base percentage (OBP) to find the underappreciated players that really have value. The As had a successful run that season, and they almost pulled it off. It was the Angels that won the World Series that year. Two years later, the Boston Red Sox implemented the same system to win the 2004 World Series. Sabermetrics has led to more modern baseball stats like wins above replacement (WAR), launch angles, and spin rates. For baseball, it is easy to see and measure individual performance and contribution since the individual is either a batter, a pitcher, or a fielder. Each play contributes to the statics. Baseball makes sense to me when it comes to statistical numbers. What about other sports?

For football, there are some clear individual statics to draw from like quarterback, receiver, linebacker all have measurable stats, but linesman is a little tricky. Hockey, basketball, and soccer require everyone on the team to contribute to offense and defense. Measuring individual performance is a little more nuanced for these sports. There is also the luck factor. There have been different studies on the balance of luck versus skill in different sports <sup>1,2</sup>. The different studies produce slightly different results, but hockey requires the most luck compared to the other forementioned sports.

Sabermetrics for hockey is a challenge. Goalies are the simplest to figure out with GAA, win/loss, save percentage, etc. Forwards and defense players are where the analytics come into play. There have been attempts at analytics with Corsi and Fenwick to look at a player's shooting attempts <sup>3</sup>. There are newer analytics being investigated. At the start of the season, I did a little research on the analytical approaches. On the surface, these analytics lean more on offensive results. Defense doesn't appear to be something as important. To make things a little more difficult, the AHL doesn't record time on ice, faceoff wins, shots, block shots, and hits like those recorded in an NHL game. These are the numbers along with goals and assists to go in to all these analytical equations. The AHL is a development league where players are

developing their skills and hopefully taking their game to the NHL. It clear that none of the NHL analytics can be applied. The internet is full of arm chair sports critics and stat gatherers. There are a few who have looked at creating analytics based on data recorded by the AHL <sup>4,5</sup>. These attempts to use a point share systems using complicated mathematics. Again, point share looks at the offensive numbers as well as points per game (PPG). I attempted these point-share calculations with no success.

There has to be a simpler method based on the data game data collected. Keep in mind I have never played hockey, but I have been a fan for some time so I basic understand how the game is played. I came up with a quick value that includes an offense number with a representative defense number: **PMPPG – Plus/Minus + Points per Game**. Below are the final season stats <sup>7,8,9</sup> for the Firebirds that include points per game (PPG) and PMPPG. Team leaders for each category are in bold.

Name	Pos	GP	G	A	P	PIM	+/-	PPG	PMPPG
Ben Meyers	F	57	23	28	<b>51</b>	26	-2	<b>0.895</b>	<b>0.860</b>
Jani Nyman	F	58	<b>28</b>	16	44	31	3	0.759	0.810
Logan Morrison	F	<b>72</b>	14	28	42	16	8	0.583	0.694
Nikolas Brouillard	D	69	7	31	38	55	3	0.551	0.594
Maxime Lajoie	D	70	4	<b>34</b>	38	32	13	0.543	0.729
Ryan Winterton	F	56	18	19	37	26	11	0.661	0.857
Jagger Firkus	F	69	15	21	36	20	8	0.522	0.638
Brandon Biro	F	56	6	28	34	19	-2	0.607	0.571
Ty Nelson	D	<b>72</b>	6	26	32	48	<b>17</b>	0.444	0.681
John Hayden	F	44	11	16	27	34	-2	0.614	0.568
Lleyton Roed	F	56	13	13	26	19	8	0.464	0.607
Cale Fleury	D	39	7	19	26	11	10	0.667	0.923
Daniel Sprong	F	19	11	14	25	6	0	1.316	1.316
Eduard Sale	F	51	6	15	21	14	6	0.412	0.529
David Goyette	F	54	6	12	18	20	5	0.333	0.426
Gustav Olofsson	D	51	3	14	17	24	-6	0.333	0.216
Luke Henman	F	59	6	10	16	15	-3	0.271	0.220
Ville Ottavainen	D	68	3	12	15	41	7	0.221	0.324
Jacob Melanson	F	42	8	5	13	48	-3	0.310	0.238
Max McCormick	F	19	7	6	13	13	-4	0.684	0.474
Mitchell Stephens	F	35	6	7	13	23	-2	0.371	0.314
Ian McKinnon	F	53	6	5	11	<b>141</b>	0	0.208	0.208
Tucker Robertson	F	38	4	5	9	13	-5	0.237	0.105
Ryan Jones	D	41	0	7	7	20	-2	0.171	0.122
Tye Kartye	F	3	2	2	4	4	1	1.333	1.667
Charlie Wright	D	21	0	4	4	2	-3	0.190	0.048
Oscar Fisker Mølgaard	F	7	2	1	3	0	-1	0.429	0.286
Andrei Loshko	F	1	2	0	2	0	1	2.000	3.000
Justin Janicke	F	1	0	1	1	0	1	1.000	2.000
Nathan Villeneuve	F	5	0	1	1	9	2	0.200	0.600
Jake McLaughlin	D	1	0	0	0	0	0	0.000	0.000

Jakub Fibigr	D	1	0	0	0	0	-1	0.000	-1.000
Jack LaFontaine	G	2	0	0	0	0		0.000	0.000
Carson Rehkopf	F	2	0	0	0	0	0	0.000	0.000
Victor Östman	G	5	0	0	0	0		0.000	0.000
Cade Borchart	F	5	0	0	0	0	-3	0.000	-0.600
Philipp Grubauer	G	7	0	0	0	0		0.000	0.000
Ales Stezka	G	26	0	0	0	0		0.000	0.000
Niklas Kokko	G	33	0	0	0	0		0.000	0.000

PMPPG adds a different look than a plan PPG as it highlights the defensemen production contributions. A quick check on PMPPG for other teams like the Reign and Barracuda, there might be 2 or 3 players that stand out, but the rest are well behind. The Firebirds have a more balanced producing lineup with many players above .500 PMPPG.

Other leader statistics:

- Jani Nyman got the most power play goals.
- Ryan Winterton the most shorthanded goals.
- Lleyton Roed the most game winning goals.

Goalie Statistics:

Player	GP	Min	GA	GAA	W	L	T	Saves	Pct	EN	Shutouts
Niklas Kokko	33	1939	73	2.26	20	10	2	762	0.913	7	0
Jack LaFontaine	2	126	5	2.38	1	0	1	55	0.917	0	0
Victor Ostman	5	303	12	2.38	2	1	2	131	0.916	0	1
Philipp Grubauer	7	418	20	2.87	5	2	0	167	0.893	1	0
Ales Stezka	26	1525	78	3.07	9	12	5	698	0.899	4	0

What is clear is that individual hockey statistics are team and luck dependent. History has shown that in any sport, take player out of one team and put them in another, they may or may not perform better with the new team. The Kraken experienced this reality with their preseason and trade deadline signings. Hockey requires strong team chemistry. Knowing where your teammates are on the ice and where they will go next drives success. It is clear that Hockey analytics requires a different type of calculus. Coaches and scouts will continue to play a big role in evaluating players. The Firebirds had to go with a younger group this year because of the veterans rule <sup>6</sup>. The core veterans that have been on the team since inception have clearly had a positive influence on the new players. The new players have made big contribution this season that have led the Firebirds to the payoff for the 3<sup>rd</sup> season in existence. Chemistry played a big roll. Creating and fostering a winning organization starts with the AHL and ECHL teams. With the season over, the Firebirds and the Kansas City Mavericks look build that winning mindset in their respective playoffs.

### Totals by Forwards and Defense

During the season, I started to note the totals for goals, assists, points and +/- by forwards and defense. Here are the season results for the Firebirds:

Firebirds	G	A	PTS	+/-
Forwards	194	253	447	27
Defense	30	147	177	38

As a comparison, here are the season results for the other playoff teams: Wranglers, Barracuda, Reign, Eagles, and Canucks

Wranglers	G	A	PTS	+/-
Forwards	197	276	473	-40
Defense	31	137	168	5

Barracuda	G	A	PTS	+/-
Forwards	221	328	549	-21
Defense	44	117	161	-13

Reign	G	A	PTS	+/-
Forwards	201	259	460	-2
Defense	19	123	142	47

Eagles	G	A	PTS	+/-
Forwards	190	275	465	129
Defense	58	134	192	107

Canucks	G	A	PTS	+/-
Forwards	209	278	488	68
Defense	29	133	162	74

The totals just reconfirm the standings and playoff seeding. The Eagles had a great season with a score differential of +65.

### Unofficial Home Game Stats 2024-2025: Faceoff wins, Icing and Offsides

In last year's playoffs, I noticed the Firebirds game flow was a little different compared to the regular season. It wasn't apparent at first, but I noticed they were winning more faceoffs. During the season when they got an icing, they would lose the faceoff, but work to get the puck back. The results in the playoffs were different. I noticed the AHL doesn't track this statistic. Faceoffs are like a pitcher throwing a pitch, the center hiking the football to the quarterback, or a throw in from the sidelines. Faceoffs start the play in Hockey. Winning the faceoff gives a team more control of the game. Winning the faceoff is one thing,

but keeping the puck is another. The Firebirds went all the way to the finals in 2024. During that run, I attempted to record faceoffs wins on paper, which was a little difficult along with my other work. They were winning the faceoff dot.

This season I decided to track faceoffs just for fun. I wrote a computer program that can quickly enter information. Faceoffs was the primary stat, but this changed. I just so happen to watch a Kraken game, and the announcers mentioned that there are people tracking icings and offsides. I added tracking these to the program after the first 4 games.

As I tracked this data, it became apparent why faceoffs are something to pay attention too. Here are a few examples on how faceoff wins play a key role:

- The first is from the recent Round 1 Game 1 playoff game between the Barracuda and Reign. Both teams didn't really play well, but over the course of the game the Barracuda tilted the ice. At one point in the game, the Barracuda had 70% faceoffs winning percentage, which resulted in more O-zone time. In the end the Barracuda won the faceoffs with 40 to the Reign 25. That is a 61% faceoff win percentage. They had 25 shots on goal to the Reign's 17. The Barracuda won 2-0. The Reign had several chances, but no real control.
- There have been a few times during the season where the Firebirds were called for icing, lose the faceoff, and because they lost the subsequent faceoff, they fish the puck out of their net.
- Finally, there is the recent Round 1 Game 1 with Calgary Wranglers. The Wranglers tied the game with off faceoff win with a few seconds left. During regulation the faceoff wins were even. The Firebirds won 30 faceoffs to the Wranglers 29. In the 3 overtimes periods, the Firebirds won the faceoff 21 to 13. They controlled the 2<sup>nd</sup> overtime in shots on goal 11 to 2. Eventually, the Firebirds won the game in the 3<sup>rd</sup> overtime.

The following stats are unofficial. The AHL doesn't show faceoff wins, icing, or offsides on the score sheet. My interpretation of a faceoff win is the team that comes away with the puck from the faceoff circle. The exceptions are a shot on goal by the attacking team and the defense punching the puck forward out of the zone. **The results have a margin of error.** The data is only for home games as a streaming feed for away games is not reliable.

The Firebirds played 36 home games, and they had a home record of 17-13-2-4. I only captured icing and offsides for the last 32 games. The icing results were even between all opponents and the Firebirds. The Firebirds are discipline enough to stay onside.

Icing	Total (Last 32 Games)
Opp	141
Firebirds	142

Offsides	Total (Last 32 Games)
Opp	83
Firebirds	64

There were 2040 faceoffs at home this season. The Firebirds won 51% of the faceoffs.

Faceoffs	Total	Win Percentage
Opp	991	49%
Firebirds	1049	51%

The following is a breakdown of faceoff wins based on zone and even strength, power play, and penalty kill.

Zone	Opp			Firebirds		
	ES	PP	PK	ES	PP	PK
Attack	228	84	2	254	100	4
Neutral	266	22	8	284	13	10
Defense	297	9	75	301	11	72

ES – Even Strength, PP – Power Play, PK – Penalty Kill

Here are the percentages breakdown for even strength, power play, and penalty kill:

Even Strength	Win Percentage
Opp	49
Firebirds	51

Powerplay	Win Percentage
Opp	41
Firebirds	59

Penalty Kill	Win Percentage
Opp	57
Firebirds	43

Firebirds Even Strength Faceoff Win Percentage based on zone.

Zone	Win Percentage
Attack	46
Neutral	52
Defense	57

Zooming on critical faceoffs: power play and penalty kill.

Powerplay- Attack Zone	Win Percentage
Opp	43
Firebirds	57

Penalty Kill - Defense Zone	Win Percentage
Opp	54
Firebirds	46

For the 36 home games, the Firebirds faceoff win record was 21-14-1. Breaking this down further:

- When the Firebirds win the faceoff battle, their win/loss/OT/SO record is 9-8-1-3
- When the Firebirds lose the faceoff battle, their win/loss/OT/SO record is 7-5-1-1
- When there is a tie in faceoffs battle, their win/loss/OT/SO record is 1-0-0-0

These final results are one thing, but the stats come alive during the game. Coach Laxdal mentioned a few times during the season that he had to remind the players to play more competitive and physical. When the team was not playing to their full potential, the faceoff results were poor. Once the coaches did their little reminder, the Firebirds would start winning faceoffs. The same would go for the opponents. Combining a game's faceoff results with all the other game results, provide a more detailed picture of what transpired.

Of course, knowing the individual players faceoff results would be more interesting. This kind of data collecting requires a more sophisticated computer application and more of my attention than I can afford. Coaches know who their faceoff specialist are so anything I do is redundant. For me, the statistician work comes first.

### Final Thoughts

Sabermetrics for hockey is a challenge. Compared to other sports, a hockey player's stats are dependent on the teammates and the players they are playing against. There are a lot of variables in play. My PMPPG was just one idea, but could be further refined.

The Kraken prospects are now arriving to the AHL, and they are learning and growing into elite players. As the season stats show, the Firebirds had an impressive season with a younger team, which led to a spot in the playoffs. The Kraken scouting and drafting process is looking good. Callups and injuries made the regular season play a little uneven. Of course, the AHL season is for learning and working for a playoff spot.

The faceoff, icing, and offside tracking was a little side project that was insightful. It has been fun watching this Firebirds team take flight. Now, it is on to the playoffs to build that winning mindset. The Firebirds are past round 1 of the playoffs, so we will see how far they fly.

### References:

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