

Coachella Valley Firebirds 2024-2025 Season Half Way Review

By Sean D. Liming January 14, 2025 – seanliming.com

36 games finished and 36 games to go. The Firebirds have reached the halfway point of the season, and the results so far are impressive. Considering all the injuries and personal cycling to and from the Kraken, the Firebirds are 19-12-1-4 with 43 points. The 43 points have them tied in the Pacific Division with two other teams with two more teams behind them within 4 points. They are 4 points behind Calgary who are the top team in both the Pacific Division and the Western Conference. They are 6 points from the Hershey Bears for the top spot in the AHL. It has been a winding road to get to this record so this review will attempt to capture some highlights.

Going back to the start of the seasons, the Kraken organization made a coaching change by naming the Firebirds head coach, Dan Bylsma, as the new head coach of the Kraken. As a result, the Firebirds hired a new coach, Derek Laxdal. A coaching change was not the only change to impact the Firebirds. This was the first year that the AHL's Veterans Rule is being applied. For the first two years, the Firebirds could have a roster full of veteran players while their young draft picks work their way up from junior hockey. The 2024-2025 season was going to see a lot more younger players and rookies on the squad. There is a nice article by Blaiz Grubic, Soundofhockey.com that explains the veterans rule: [Understanding the AHL veteran rule and its impact on the Coachella Valley Firebirds - Sound Of Hockey](#). One goal of the season was to establish the playing systems that NHL, AHL, and ECHL teams were going to implement. The most important goal was to create a winning environment at all levels.

Unfortunately, the Kraken have had some issues. Key injuries to forwards, defense, and goalies have been a problem which had required calls ups from the Firebirds. In addition, there has been a lack of offense at times, and giving up too many goals has not helped. Expecting an instant turn-around from last year was never a reality, and it was always going to be a work in progress. The NHL level is unforgiving for teams in transition; just look at the last 7 seasons for the Anaheim Ducks as a good example. Expect the Kraken to take a couple years to get things turned around, and the key will be the players coming up through the system.

The Kraken issues has affected the Firebirds. The Firebirds have had to play their young players a lot more. Several veteran players such Max McCormick, Ryan Winterton, John Hayden, Cale Fleury, Ben Meyers, Mitchell Stephens, Alex Stezka, and Gustov Olofsson have been called up to the Kraken to either play or be a healthy scratch. Two key players, Max McCormick and Jacob Melanson have been on the injury list for some time, and both are have recently come off the injury list. Not surprising to see that the Firebirds have had some inconsistency.

Regardless of all the Kraken woes, the positive for the Firebirds is that the younger players get ice time, and there is no substitute learn-by-doing when developing one's skills. Also, there has been some call up from the ECHL Mavericks who are also having a winning season. Amazingly, we are seeing these young players grow before our eyes. The coaching staff and trainers have played a big role. Coach Laxdal experience coaching at all levels has shone through. At each game's media conference, he takes the time to clearly explain the development process, the areas that need improvement, and what he wants to see on the ice. It is clear that he is a true teacher of the game. With all that said, here are the highlights of the season so far:

- **Team Chemistry** – It takes time to create the team chemistry needed to win. Last year’s team had some issues. They learned from their mistakes to turn things around after the new year to go on an incredible run to the Calder Cup Finals. This year’s team has started slow, but they are not doing the same mistakes. Their play is much better, and they are continuing to improve. They tend to struggle early in the game. When they have a slow start, I notice that they are not winning in the face off circle. As the game goes on, the face off wins even out, and they are playing better. Different teams implement different systems, and it takes time to learn these systems.
- **Physical Play** – One area to improve is the physical play. At the start of the season, players were not rubbing opponents off the puck, which sometimes resulted in a Firebird penalty for holding, tripping, etc. Coach Laxdal pointed out that players at the juniors level focus on scoring, and the physical play isn’t there. At this level the younger players have to learn the physical game. This is where training and conditioning comes in. Over the past month, the physical play has picked up and separating the opponent from the puck is now the norm.
- **Key Victories** – In November, they played the Colorado Eagles on back-to-back nights. They lost the first game by a big margin, but with some players returning from the Kraken, they won the next game which started a nice run of 5 victories in the row. Calgary has the best record in the Western Conference. Calgary took care of business in the first game against the Firebirds, but on back-to-back nights in December, the Firebirds played some of the best hockey and winning both games. There are the games against other division opponent, Texas Stars and Chicago Wolves. The Firebirds are 3-0-0-1 at home against these two teams. They will face both teams on the in the next couple months.
- **Power Play** – For the first couple months of the season, the power play was last in the AHL. Coach Laxdal said it is too early to worry about the power play since team chemistry has to build. Slowly they Firebirds have been finding success and are close to top 10 in the league on power play goals. They tried a two-man tip play Infront of the net, but eventually migrated to better puck movement to open shooting lanes. Jani Nyman with his power slap shot, aka Jani’s Hammer or the Finnisher – I am still working on this, has been the go-to play. To keep other teams honest, they have implemented cycle play recently on the other side of the ice that has been effective.
- **Young Starts** -The younger players have stepped up. The top four players in points on the team are rookies. Jani Nyman is one of the top rookie goal scorers in the AHL, and he is the leading goal scorer on the team. Lleyton Road and Jagger Firkus have joined Jani as part of the top four players in points on the team. Special mention has to go to Eduard Sale, who went off to play in the World Junior Tournament for Team Czechia. He was named team captain and scored the final shootout goals to help Team Czechia win the bronze metal. On the defensive side, Ty Nelson has been a consistent presence on the ice contributing in the assist category. Finally, there is Nikke Kokko who performance has been completely unexpected. The Finnish goalie is in the top 20 in the AHL in goals against average and has a record of 11-2-1-0.
- **Veteran Presence** - The veterans are also doing very well. Ben Meyers leads the team in points. Ryan Winterton was the leader in points, which got him a call up to the Kraken. While with the Kraken, he got his first NHL point on an assist. Brandon Biro, John Hayden, Logan Morrison, Max Lajoi, Nikolas Brouillard, and Cale Fleury have been the steady presence on the ice and the score sheet.
- **Daniel Sprong** - The most recent addition, Daniel has bounced around the league. Acquired in a trade to the Kraken in November to help with offense. The needed offense didn’t materialize so the Kraken put him on waivers. No team claimed him, and he was assigned to the Firebirds. A 40-goal scorer in the NHL over the past two seasons, he is looking to get back to the NHL. He skill level on the ice is very noticeable. He has scored the game winning goal in his first two games with

the Firebirds. His pairing with the Lleyton Roed has resulted in 4 goals in two games. He might not be with the Firebirds long, but he has shown a positive effect to a young team.

Watching the team come together and develop their identity has been one of the pleasures of following the team. Last year's team with veterans struggled early in the season, and picked up the pace after the new year. This year's Firebirds have so far repeated the same development process. They have won 4 out of 5 to start the new year. The next few months should be an exciting run to the Calder Cup Playoffs.