

Opening night is here...finally! After a long off-season, the United States Hockey League is prepared to embark on the 2008-09 season, the league's 30th as an all-junior circuit.

There were myriad changes in the league during the off-season. The league saw a change at the top, as longtime leader Gino Gasparini began the transition into his much-deserved retirement. He will stay with the league through its 30th campaign as an executive vice president and senior consultant, helping it transition into the leadership of new Commissioner, Skip Prince. Prince comes to the USHL with an impressive resume, including a long stint in the corporate office of the NHL.



The coaching ranks in the USHL were not exempt from change. On opening night 2008, there will be seven coaches behind the bench of a team they weren't with at the close of last season. In total the coaching changes saw over 1,200 victories walk away from the league. Among the teams that will have a new bench boss this season are Indiana and Omaha, last season's division winners.

One team from last year, the Ohio Jr. Blue Jackets, has left the league, while a new member, the Fargo Force, will enter and take up residence in the always tough West Division.

With so many changes, there are bound to be questions as the 2008-09 season kicks off. Get some answers below, with a capsule of each of the USHL's 12 teams.



Cedar Rapids RoughRiders

Quick Facts

Head Coach: Mark Carlson (288-199-48)

Arena: Cedar Rapids Ice Arena (4,000)

2007-08 Attendance/Average: 81,831/2,727 (8th)

Years In USHL: 10

Previous: North Iowa Huskies (1983-99)

Anderson Cups: 1

Clark Cups: 1

All-Time Record: 584-629-80

2008-09 Key Players: Matt Donovan, Robin Bergman, Mike Seidel

A Look Back: 2007-08

Record: 33-22-5

Points: 71

Division/League Finish: 3rd/5th

Offense: 3.33 GPG (4th)

Defense: 2.60 GAA (3rd)

Power Play: 20.3% (1st)

Penalty Kill: 82.5% (9th)

Longest Winning Streak: 5 games

Longest Losing Streak: 5 games (0-3-2)
Playoff Run: Lost in first round to Waterloo

Food For Thought: The RoughRiders averaged 6.0 goals-per-game through the pre-season, scoring 36 times in six games.



Chicago Steel

Quick Facts

Head Coach: Steve Poapst (40-51-7)
Arena: The Edge Ice Arena (2,600)
2007-08 Attendance/Average: 33,131/1,104 (11th)
Years In USHL: 9
Previous: Fargo-Moorhead Ice Sharks (1996-00)
Anderson Cups: 0
Clark Cups: 0
All-Time Record: 280-363-58
2008-09 Key Players: Eric Alexander, Mike Walsh, Max Nicastro

A Look Back: 2007-08

Record: 32-22-6
Points: 70
Division/League Finish: 4th/6th
Offense: 3.63 GPG (3rd)
Defense: 3.32 GAA (8th)
Power Play: 16% (7th)
Penalty Kill: 80.5% (11th)
Longest Winning Streak: 6 games
Longest Losing Streak: 6 games (0-5-1)
Playoff Run: Lost in second round to Waterloo



Detroit Red Wings draft pick Max Nicastro is the USHL's highest returning selection from the 2008 NHL Draft. He's one of 15 current NHL picks who will be playing in the USHL in 2008-09.

Food For Thought: Since moving to Chicago from Fargo-Moorhead in 2000, the Steel have never had back-to-back winning seasons.



Des Moines Buccaneers

Quick Facts

Head Coach: J.P. Parise (0-0-0)
Arena: Buccaneer Arena (3,400)
2007-08 Attendance/Average: 88,679/2,955 (6th)

Years In USHL: 29

Anderson Cups: 4

Clark Cups: 4

All-Time Record: 752-631-80

2008-09 Key Players: Brett Bruneteau, Fredrik Bergman, Austin Handley

A Look Back: 2007-08

Record: 14-40-6

Points: 34

Division/League Finish: 6th/11th

Offense: 2.23 GPG (11th)

Defense: 3.55 GAA (9th)

Power Play: 12.4% (12th)

Penalty Kill: 79.9% (12th)

Longest Winning Streak: 2 games

Longest Losing Streak: 7 games (0-6-1)

Playoff Run: Did not qualify

Food For Thought: The last five head coaches of the Buccaneers have averaged 29.8 wins in their first full season. Only one, Scott Owens in 1995-96, finished below .500 in his first year.



Fargo Force

Quick Facts

Head Coach: Dean Blais (0-0-0)

Arena: Urban Plains Center (3,400)

2007-08 Attendance/Average: N/A

Years In USHL: 1

Anderson Cups: 0

Clark Cups: 0

All-Time Record: 0-0-0

2008-09 Key Players: Steve Spinell, Luke Witkowski, Matt Leitner

Food For Thought: The Force open the season with eight straight games on the road as they wait for the construction of their arena to be completed.



Green Bay Gamblers

Quick Facts

Head Coach: Jon Cooper (0-0-0)

Arena: Resch Center (8,755)

2007-08 Attendance/Average: 79,623/2,654 (9th)

Years In USHL: 15

Anderson Cups: 2
Clark Cups: 2
All-Time Record: 380-348-68
2008-09 Key Players: Jacob Johnstone, Michael Forney, C.J. Lee

A Look Back: 2007-08

Record: 13-41-6
Points: 32
Division/League Finish: 6th/12th
Offense: 2.17 GPG (12th)
Defense: 3.73 GAA (12th)
Power Play: 15.8% (8th)
Penalty Kill: 83.4% (6th)
Longest Winning Streak: 2 games
Longest Losing Streak: 14 games (0-12-2)
Playoff Run: Did not qualify

Food For Thought: The last time the Gamblers won a playoff game was April 24, 2002, a 4-1 win over Sioux City in game one of their Clark Cup semifinal series. They are in the midst of the longest playoff win drought of any current USHL team.



Indiana Ice

Quick Facts

Head Coach: Jeff Blashill (0-0-0)
Arena: Pepsi Coliseum (6,100)
2007-08 Attendance/Average: 106,850/3,561 (2nd)
Years In USHL: 5
Previous: Danville Wings (2003-04)
Anderson Cups: 0
Clark Cups: 0
All-Time Record: 140-128-32
2008-09 Key Players: Brent Gwidt, Alex Handy, Will MacDonald

A Look Back: 2007-08

Record: 39-15-6
Points: 84
Division/League Finish: 1st/2nd
Offense: 3.72 GPG (2nd)
Defense: 3.22 GAA (7th)
Power Play: 15.6% (9th)
Penalty Kill: 84.7% (4th)
Longest Winning Streak: 7 games
Longest Losing Streak: 5 games (0-5-0)
Playoff Run: Lost in first round to Chicago

Food For Thought: The Ice has seen its win total increase in each of their first four seasons in Indiana - 20 in 2004-05, 25 in 2005-06, 27 in 2006-07 and 39 in 2007-08.



Lincoln Stars

Quick Facts

Head Coach: Jimmy McGroarty (31-22-7)

Arena: The Ice Box (4,610)

2007-08 Attendance/Average: 130,235/4,341 (1st)

Years In USHL: 13

Anderson Cups: 3

Clark Cups: 2

All-Time Record: 437-210-54

2008-09 Key Players: Jake Newton, Chris Forfar, Ross Henry

A Look Back: 2007-08

Record: 31-22-7

Points: 69

Division/League Finish: 3rd/7th

Offense: 3.10 GPG (7th)

Defense: 2.72 GAA (4th)

Power Play: 17.6% (4th)

Penalty Kill: 86.6% (1st)

Longest Winnings Streak: 10 games

Longest Losing Streak: 4 games (0-3-1)

Playoff Run: Lost in second round to Omaha

Food For Thought: The Stars were 21-9-5 last season after the holiday break, including a sparkling record of 8-0-1 in January.



Omaha Lancers

Quick Facts

Head Coach: Bliss Littler (209-150-37)

Arena: Mid America Center (6,924)

2007-08 Attendance/Average: 89,061/2,968 (5th)

Years In USHL: 23

Anderson Cups: 5

Clark Cups: 7

All-Time Record: 700-411-68

2008-09: Key Players: Ben Arnt, Dakota Eveland, Matt White

A Look Back: 2007-08

Record: 43-12-5

Points: 91

Division/League Finish: 1st/1st

Offense: 3.73 GPG (1st)

Defense: 2.32 GAA (1st)

Power Play: 19.3% (2nd)

Penalty Kill: 85.7 (3rd)

Longest Winning Streak: 12 games

Longest Losing Streak: 2 games (0-2-0)

Playoff Run: Won Clark Cup

Food For Thought: Talk about a season of change, the Lancers, in addition to a new coaching staff, have only four returning players from a year ago.



Sioux City Musketeers

Quick Facts

Head Coach: Todd Knott (4-9-2)

Arena: Tyson Event Center (5,500)

2007-08 Attendance/Average: 75,472/2,515 (10th)

Years In USHL: 30

Anderson Cups: 2

Clark Cups: 3

All-Time Record: 778-655-82

2008-09: Key Players: Steve Thompson, Mitch Bruijsten, Seth Helgeson

A Look Back: 2007-08

Record: 32-25-3

Points: 67

Division/League Finish: 4th/8th

Offense: 3.23 GPG (6th)

Defense: 3.08 GAA (6th)

Power Play: 13.7% (11th)

Penalty Kill: 81.3% (10th)

Longest Winning Streak: 10 games

Longest Losing Streak: 5 games (0-5-0)

Playoff Run: Lost in first round to Omaha

Food For Thought: The last two seasons, Sioux City is a combined 36-9-0 before the holiday break and 30-37-8 after.



Sioux Falls Stampede

Quick Facts

Head Coach: Kevin Hartzell (307-136-23)

Arena: Sioux Falls Arena (4,600)

2007-08 Attendance/Average: 101,928/3,397 (3rd)

Years In USHL: 10

Anderson Cups: 1

Clark Cups: 1

All-Time Record: 290-205-40

2008-09 Key Players: Eric Hartzell, Robbie Vrolyk, Terry Broadhurst

A Look Back: 2007-08

Record: 35-19-6

Points: 76

Division/League Finish: 2nd/4th

Offense: 3.32 GPG (5th)

Defense: 2.92 GAA (5th)

Power Play: 16.9% (5th)

Penalty Kill: 84.2% (5th)

Longest Winning Streak: 7 games

Longest Losing Streak: 4 games (0-3-1)

Playoff Run: Lost in first round to Lincoln

Food For Thought: The Stampede have had at least one player chosen in each of the last eight NHL drafts.



Tri-City Storm

Quick Facts

Head Coach: Tom Rudrud (16-5-4)

Arena: FirstTier Events Center (4,200)

2007-08 Attendance/Average: 84,448/2,814 (7th)

Years In USHL: 9

Previous: St. Paul/Twin Cities Vulcans (1979-00)

Anderson Cups: 1

Clark Cups: 0

All-Time Record: 799-627-88

2008-09 Key Players: Mike Cichy, Nick Hopper, Danny Heath

A Look Back: 2007-08

Record: 24-34-2

Points: 50

Division/League Finish: 5th/10th

Offense: 2.55 GPG (10th)

Defense: 3.55 GAA (10th)

Power Play: 15.3% (10th)

Penalty Kill: 82.8% (8th)

Longest Winning Streak: 3 games

Longest Losing Streak: 6 games (0-6-0)

Playoff Run: Did not qualify

Food For Thought: Last seasons's point total of 50 was the lowest total the franchise has earned in a season since the Twin Cities Vulcans picked up 44 points during the 1998-99 season.



Tri-City's Mike Cichy is the USHL's top returning scorer from a year ago.



Waterloo Black Hawks

Quick Facts

Head Coach: P.K. O'Handley (337-320-51)

Arena: Young Arena (3,500)

2007-08 Attendance/Average: 90,368/3,012 (4th)

Years In USHL: 30

Anderson Cups: 1

Clark Cups: 1

All-Time Record: 583-817-67

2008-09 Key Players: Joe Howe, Nick Larson, Craig Smith

A Look Back: 2007-08

Record: 38-17-5

Points: 81

Division/League Finish: 2nd/3rd

Offense: 3.05 GPG (8th)

Defense: 2.52 GAA (2nd)

Power Play: 18.6% (3rd)

Penalty Kill: 85.9% (2nd)

Longest Winning Streak: 7 games

Longest Losing Streak: 4 games (0-2-2)

Playoff Run: Lost in final round to Omaha

Food For Thought: The Black Hawks enter the season with 15 players already committed to NCAA Division I schools, the most of any USHL team.