Atlanta Gladiator captain Derek Nesbitt has been with his team for both its brightest and darkest moments during his nine seasons with the franchise. At 39, Nesbitt is the oldest active player in the ECHL, and he’s seen the Gladiators finish in almost every place possible during his career. But there is one significant finish that the veteran has yet to achieve with Atlanta: a Kelly Cup title. Nesbitt and the Gladiators, loaded with experienced talent, now look to rectify that and win the franchise’s first Kelly Cup in 2022.

The team took the first step toward the Cup when it clinched its first berth in the ECHL’s postseason since 2018.

“It feels great to have already clinched a playoff spot,” Nesbitt said. “Anytime you get that ‘X’ by your team in the standings it’s a great feeling.”

From uncertainty to hope

Most analysts expected very little from Atlanta going into this season. The team had missed three consecutive post-seasons and opted out of the 2020-2021 season entirely due to the ECHL’s COVID-19 voluntary-suspension policy.

But with so many new pieces and no campaign last year to build on, Atlanta’s offseason was full of uncertainty.

“I didn’t really know what to expect after a year of not playing games,” Nesbitt said. “I know with bringing in veterans like Mike Pelcho, Cody Sylvester, Dalton Thrower and Tim Davison, then adding Eric Neiley, you immediately have a group that was key right from the beginning. We set a pretty solid standard and foundation and we have a great group of first-, second-, and third-year guys who followed and became leaders in their own right.”

A major turnaround

The Gladiators, still hovering slightly above the .500 mark, suddenly exploded for an 11-game win streak to skyrocket their playoff chances. Atlanta won 14 of its 16 games from Feb. 18 to March 25, outscoring opponents 65-38.

“When let our losses get too low or highs too high,” Nesbitt explained. “When I believe was a big contributing factor to why we have had so many comeback wins and [we] able to stay on some winning streaks.

“We have a belief in our room where we never give up a game. That’s a great team trait to have going into playoffs.”

The nine-game win streak tied for the longest infanchise history with the 2006 team, the only Gladiators quad to advance to the Kelly Cup Finals — until now.

A long-sought dream now within reach

Atlanta clinched its spot in the Kelly Cup with a wild, 4-3 shootout win over Greenville on April 1. The Swamp Rabbits tied the game at 3-3 with 12 seconds left and after a scoreless overtime, the game went to shootout. Atlanta had already clinched a playoff spot when it forced overtime, but a couple of heroic saves by Joe Murdacco secured the celebration.

“We played the playoffs like it was inevitable for us for a while,” Nesbitt said. “When it happens is great and I know we were all happy it was clinched in a game we won rather than sitting at home scoreboard watching. It’s a nice step to a bigger pressure and it was nice to check that one off the list.”

“The feeling was unbelievable,” Sylvester said. “It’s been a couple of years now that I’ve been able to make the playoffs, so to be able to battle for a Cup is a very fun and exciting moment.”

The nine-game win streak also tied for the league’s franchise history with the 2006 team, the only Gladiators squad to advance to the Kelly Cup Finals — until now.

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By Atlanta Gladiators

Gladiators make ECHL playoffs

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Atlanta Gladiators: The Road to the Kelly Cup

2022 Kelly Cup: Don’t miss the Gladiators quest for the championship

By Atlanta Gladiators

The Atlanta Gladiators have made the playoffs for the Kelly Cup.

The ECHL's championship tournament kicked off on April 17, featuring the six North American teams in six series. Four teams from the South Division will face off in the first three rounds of play, with the two remaining seven games for the division championship.

Starting May 20, the four division Champions will join the Gladiators for the Slide Playoffs. The South Division winners will take on the North Division champions for the Eastern Conference title. Finally, the two conference champions will face off for the Kelly Cup itself.

Gladiators offer family fun on and off the ice

By Atlanta Gladiators

From the feeling of the cool arena, steaming from the rink, to the sight of players bounding towards the goal, there are plenty of thrills when attending a hockey game — especially with the Atlanta Gladiators.

But there's also plenty of excitement off the ice. With tons of activities before, during and after the game, adults and kids alike are guaranteed to have a blast.

Here are just a few of the activities you can expect when the Gladiators hit the home games at Gas South Arena.

Want to try to win some family friendly prizes while waiting for the last period to start? In the beginning of the second intermission, fans can throw foam pucks on the ice for a chance to win a $50 Kroger gift card. They throw out a large knage rubber puck and you get to try to get it past the goalie, the one lands on the dot, whichever participant lands closest will receive a $25 Kroger gift card.

High-Five Tunnel

High-fiving players before, while and after the game is a necessity for any hockey fan. But that's not all — high-fiving is the pre-function room at the starting line when the game is about to begin.

Skatepup Saturdays

After every Sunday game, kids get an opportunity to take a dip on the ice. Parents can sign up their child at the beginning of the game to free skate with players. If there’s a slant of kids looking to skate, the opportunity will go to the next group.

Between the Benches

For SLH, you can snag the best view of the game. For one period, you'll get to be between the Gladiators benches and the boards. While sitting in your seats, you’ll be able to get a closer view of the action, you'll have a chance to wave at the players, whose bobblehead, on occasion, may try to jump out their equipment.

Intermission games

Lucky fans will be asked to come down to the floor during intermission to participate in a variety of halftime games. Those lucky per game — and no game is the same. Previous games have included musical chairs and Scavenger Hunt-themed games. Occasionally, the Gladiators pick a prize or even a puck from the game.

GIVEAWAYS

It's first-come, first-served for those能 optimize a select game. Typically, the first 500, 1,000 or 2,000 fans will receive a prize. The number of fans depends on the giveaway. Some examples, they gave away small calendars, sports themed swag, Chiclets swag and specialty auto magnets. At a February game, for example, they gave away Jimmy Neutron-themed Swag and a mini hockey sticks with a hockey stick with their logo.

Pre-game concerts and Intermission performances

Keep an eye out for the live concerts scheduled to play before select games or during intermissions. A game ticket gives you access to the concert. Previous concerts have included Departures, The Journey Tribute Band and Biggish Rude. During intermission, a DJ often spins tunes.

Costume contests

Sometimes, fans can participate in a costume contest during intermission. Thomas has included a Marvel contest and an NHL costume contest, in which the first-place winner received a Superman and pass to the game.

Kid Zone

The Gladiators organization understands that kids can have a difficult time focusing. For those who don't want to sit and watch the entire game, the Kid Zone is open during the entire game. It's a popular destination during intermission, a free game ticket. In a basketball game, a hockey game and a basketball game. Parents can have a quiet spot to rest up, watch the games and participate in some activities.

Souvenirs

Check out the gift shop on your way out of the arena for some goodies for you or the kids. They have a lot of items, such as smack sticks and fun enamel pins. Sometimes, they even have specialty packs or jerseys from previous seasons for purchase.

Meet the Players

Position: Forward
Name: Cody Sylvester
Hometown: Kelowna, British Columbia
Quick stats:
- Recorded a 13-game point streak from February 8 to February 26
- Played more than 100 games with the South Korean National Team, including four appearances in the 2018 Winter Olympics in PyeongChang

Cody Sylvester
who leads Atlanta in points and goals. He’s a special group this year and we have worked so hard to make the playoffs but now we are in, so the real work just begins.

Position: Forward
Name: Sanghoon Shin
Hometown: Seoul, South Korea
Quick stats:
- Received a Weber grill and jersey.
- Participated in a costume contest during intermission. Themes have included a Marvel contest and an NHL costume contest, in which the first-place winner received a Superman and pass to the game.

Sanghoon Shin
who leads Atlanta in points and goals. He’s a special group this year and we have worked so hard to make the playoffs but now we are in, so the real work just begins.

Position: Forward
Name: Derek Nesbitt
Hometown: Seaforth, Ontario
Quick stats:
- Has won a Kelly Cup championship (2017, 2018)

Derek Nesbitt
who leads Atlanta in points and goals. He’s a special group this year and we have worked so hard to make the playoffs but now we are in, so the real work just begins.

Follow the Gladiators’ progress throughout the playoffs at ajc.com/gladiators
ALL IN!

KELLY CUP

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