

WSHL WEEKLY NOTES 01.25.18 – NORTHWEST DIVISION



BELLINGHAM BLAZERS (14-18-3, 31 pts)
www.BellinghamBlazers.pointstreaksites.com
@Bhamblazers

The Bellingham Blazers were humbled by Idaho last weekend, as the host IceCats were victorious on three consecutive days.

When asked about the results of the series, Bellingham Head Coach Mark Collins said he wants his players to pull something from the losses.

"I'm hoping we learned a great deal," Collins said. "For us, it's about practicing with the right pace and the right urgency in our game to be able to compete with the top teams. We had a lot of injuries and a lot of adversity, so hopefully that brings the boys together."

Though it's important to learn from tough losses, the Blazers can't dwell on them. They are winless in their last four contests and have some important divisional games coming up this weekend.

After traveling to Bremerton Ice Center for a matchup against West Sound on Friday night, Bellingham will battle Seattle in a two-game set over the weekend.

"This weekend will be interesting to see if all of those things that I mentioned happened," said Collins, referring to his club's practice habits. "We can't afford to lose any of these games going forward if we want to be in a solid position."

While everyone in the Northwest Division will qualify for the postseason, seeding and momentum are both important. The Blazers will look to inch closer to .500 while building confidence this weekend against two of their biggest division rivals.

IDAHO ICECATS (28-4-1, 57 pts)
www.idahoicecats.com

The Idaho IceCats' annual charge to the playoffs is in full effect. The IceCats swept Bellingham in dominating fashion last weekend and won every contest in a six-game homestand that opened their second-half schedule.

Idaho has built a 16-point lead over second-place West Sound. Unless things change in a big way, the IceCats will clinch their eighth division crown in a row sometime next month.

After spending most of the first half with fewer points than most of the league's other division leaders, Idaho is now tied for third in the WSHL with 57 points, trailing only El Paso and Oklahoma City, the best two clubs in the Midwest Division.

Now the IceCats embark on a nine-game road trip that will take them through Southern Oregon, Tahoe, and Utah. The stretch will begin this weekend with a three-game set against Southern Oregon and will conclude on February 11 after a series against Utah.

Idaho has yet to take on Utah this season. The three-game set marks the only time the two clubs will meet this year. The Outliers have logged some quality wins and are just one point behind the IceCats in the league standings, which suggests it should be an intense, competitive series.

Other than Idaho's stifling defense, which has been a trademark under head coach John Olver, one of its biggest strengths is its special teams play.

The IceCats are converting on 27.9 percent of their power-play opportunities, the third-best mark in the league. On the penalty kill, they are stifling opponents at a 92.1 percent clip, second-best in the WSHL.

SEATTLE TOTEMS (10-19-4, 24 pts)

www.SeattleJrTotems.com

@SeattleJrTotems

After losing each of their first two games against Tahoe last weekend, the Seattle Totems nearly pulled off a win in the third and final contest, but ultimately fell in overtime, 5-4.

The Totems have dropped five of their first six games in the month of January. They lost two of three to Bellingham to open the month before last weekend's sweep.

Forward Braden Sanchez joined Seattle over Veterans Day weekend, and he has been a valuable offensive contributor on a team that desperately lacks a scoring punch.

Sanchez is scoring at a point-per-game pace with a 5-14-19 line through 19 games with the Totems after registering 1-5-6 over 15 appearances with Superior earlier in the season.

Other than Sanchez, only three Seattle skaters are averaging one point or more per game: Michael Shippee (21-36-57), Tom Ignatovich (25-25-50), and Bogdan Klotchkov (7-3-10), who is the newest addition to the Totems' roster.

The Totems will close out their homestand this weekend with a game against West Sound on Thursday night, followed by a two-game set against Bellingham over the weekend.

SOUTHERN OREGON SPARTANS (9-26-0, 18 pts)

www.SOSpartans.com

@wshlspartans

The Southern Oregon Spartans could have laid down after a bad first half, but last weekend they proved once again that they have the talent and desire to compete in the Northwest Division.

The Spartans lost close games on consecutive nights to West Sound before breaking through for a 7-2 triumph in the series finale. The win pushed

Southern Oregon – which seemed to be dead in the water at the beginning of December – to within six points of Seattle and one step closer to getting out of last place.

The series marked the Spartans' first action since the Western States Shootout. They did not play for more than a month, but any remaining rust was shaken off by the time they logged the win over the Warriors.

Southern Oregon's performance against West Sound also illustrated the parity within the Northwest. The fact that the last-place team in the division can not only compete with but beat the second-place club shows that, outside of Idaho, talent is spread evenly throughout the division.

Forward Joel Holmberg (17-19-36) has been on a roll since his team elevated its level of play. The rookie has posted a point or more in nine of 10 games since December 8, with six multi-point outings during that stretch as well as a trio of four-point performances.

Holmberg is the team's leading scorer. The next closest player is forward Yanneck Kumli, who owns a 13-17-30 line.

The Spartans are back this weekend as they welcome Idaho to the Madhouse in Medford, Oregon, for a three-game set. It will be another measuring stick series for Southern Oregon to see just how far it has come.

TAHOE ICEMEN (18-15-3, 39 pts)

www.Tahoelcemen.com

@Tahoelcemen

The Tahoe Icemen are off to a strong start to the second half. The Icemen swept Seattle in three games in the club's first series of the new year.

Tahoe is in excellent position to compete for a first-round bye. It is now just two points back of second-seed West Sound, and it has three games in hand on the Warriors.

Icemen Head Coach Mickey Lang was pleased with the results, but downplayed the significance of getting off to a good start.

"The sweep was not very important, to be honest," Lang said. "The important aspect was not getting in bad habits and playing the game the right way."

Because the Northwest Division was reduced to six teams this season, each club in the division will qualify for the playoffs. Lang has used this to his advantage throughout the season, and it has allowed him to help his players develop without worrying about the standings.

"Every team makes the playoffs, so points and wins don't really matter," Lang continued. "We just want to get better every game and every day in practice."

Even without putting too much emphasis on wins, Lang has the Icemen on pace for their winningest season since their inaugural year in 2012-13. Pretty good for a coach who took over a team that lost 50 of 52 games just two seasons ago.

Tahoe opens up its nine-game homestand this weekend with a three-game set against Long Beach, the top team in the Western Division. Despite the Bombers' recent struggles, playing against one of the league's better clubs will be a good test for Tahoe.

WEST SOUND WARRIORS (20-18-1, 41 pts)

www.WestSoundWarriors.com

@WS_Warriors

The West Sound Warriors won their first couple of games against Southern Oregon last weekend but failed to close out the series in a 7-2 loss to the much-improved Spartans in the final contest of the three-game set.

It's only January, but the Warriors don't have many games left to play. They have six scheduled through the end of February, and will play an additional six regular-season games in the month of March.

The lack of games makes every point important when it comes to playoff seeding. The loss to Southern Oregon may not seem like a big deal now, but it could come back to bite West Sound as it enters the home stretch of the season.

Tahoe has been close behind the Warriors for quite some time, and even Bellingham, which is 10 points behind West Sound in the division standings, can be considered a threat to the Warriors' bid for a coveted first-round bye.

However, the Warriors will have plenty of opportunities to increase their lead on the fourth-place Blazers. West Sound will take on Bellingham in four of its

next six contests, including a pair of games at Bremerton Ice Center this weekend.

--- Jared Tennant for Harrington Sports Media