

WSHL WEEKLY NOTES 1.11.18 – NORTHWEST DIVISION



Mark Mauno photo

BELLINGHAM BLAZERS (12-14-3, 27 pts)
www.BellinghamBlazers.pointstreaksites.com
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It's been a solid week for the Bellingham Blazers, who have won seven of their last nine games. Bellingham recorded a 5-3 win over West Sound over the weekend before falling to the Warriors the next day. They began this week's schedule early on Wednesday night with a win over Seattle.

The Blazers host the Totems on Friday and Saturday at Bellingham Sportsplex. The series could potentially push the Blazers back to .500.

Like most of the Northwest Division, Bellingham has struggled away from home. It has dropped 10 of 15 games playing in enemy territory, including last weekend's 6-2 loss to West Sound.

Forward Ruslan Novruzov's assist against Seattle made him the first Blazer to reach 50 points this season. The 6-foot-2, 195-pound Russian's scoring line now stands at 27-23-50, making him the team leader in goals and putting him in second place on the club in assists.

Ilya Abubakirov (20-25-45) makes up the other half of Bellingham's dynamic Russian duo. The talented forward is second in goals but leads the team in helpers.

The Blazers are averaging over four goals per game, but are fourth in the division in total goals scored. With 126 goals on the season, Bellingham's offense, while inconsistent, has been a bright spot for most of the season.

IDAHO ICECATS (22-4-1, 45 pts)

www.IdahoIceCats.com

The Idaho IceCats return from their holiday break this weekend with a three-game set at home against West Sound.

The first two games will be played at Manchester Ice Centre, but the third and final contest will take place at CenturyLink Arena, home of the Idaho Steelheads.

The IceCats hold a seven-point lead atop the Northwest Division. They have a strong chance at claiming their eighth straight division crown.

The first half performance from Idaho's trio of stud goaltenders has set the bar sky high for the second half.

Three-year veteran Tyler Matthews (1.77/.977) leads the group in ice time with over 600 minutes played. Matthews is second in the league in save percentage among goalies with more than 10 appearances.

West Virginia native Jacob Hough is a rookie, but has a year under his belt playing in the NA3HL with the Pittsburgh Vengeance and the Wisconsin Whalers. His 1.62/.923 slash line shows that he belongs in this league.

Rounding out the trio is another rookie, 19-year-old Shaun Brown. With a 2.01/.904 slash line, Brown's numbers well above average. He could be the top goaltender on almost any other team in the league, but Brown appears to be the number three goalie on a club with an abundance of goaltending talent.

SEATTLE TOTEMS (9-15-3, 18 pts)

www.SeattleJrTotems.com

@SeattleJrTotems

After picking up a mammoth win over West Sound last weekend, the Seattle Totems fell to Bellingham on Wednesday night by a 3-1 final.

In the victory over the Warriors, Seattle showed off its depth as five different Totems scored. Four players netted a goal and dished out an assist, including Michael Shippee, Tyler Goclan, Daniel Nomerstad, and Tom Ignatovich.

Braden Sanchez and Bogdan Klotchkov chipped in with two assists apiece while veteran Tristan Swanson scored his third goal of the season.

Seattle is off to a decent start in the second half. The Totems now have a crucial slate of divisional games coming up over the next month or so. Their next 12 contests are against a combination of Bellingham, West Sound, Tahoe, and Southern Oregon.

After that stretch, we should have a good idea of where the Totems will end up in the final division standings.

West Sound, Tahoe, and Bellingham are all within 10 points of each other in the middle of the division. Seattle is on the outside looking in on that group, six points behind Bellingham but five points ahead of cellar-dwelling Southern Oregon.

The Totems will travel to Bellingham for a two-game set this Friday and Saturday. Seattle leads the season series between the two clubs, but the Blazers have won the last three matchups.

SOUTHERN OREGON SPARTANS (8-24-0, 16 pts)

www.SOSpartans.com

@wshlspartans

The Southern Oregon Spartans will have to wait another week to see if they can continue to ride the momentum that was created during their undefeated trip to Las Vegas for the Western States Shootout.

The Spartans will carry a five-game winning streak into their series against West Sound next weekend. The three-game set marks the beginning of Southern Oregon's second-half schedule and is the first series in its eight-game homestand.

Despite their strong play of late, the Spartans are still in sixth place in the Northwest Division. With all six teams qualifying for the playoffs, Southern Oregon can spend the rest of the regular season trying to close the gap on the teams ahead of them. The division standings are tight enough that it is impossible to project first-round match-ups at this point, but with all 19 of their remaining games against division opponents, the Spartans will have plenty of opportunities to scout the opposition.

Southern Oregon made it at least as far as the division semifinals in four of their first five seasons in the WSHL, either via bye or quarterfinal win, with the lone exception being the 2013-14 season when they missed the payoff entirely.

TAHOE ICEMEN (15-15-3, 33 pts)

www.Tahoelcemen.com

@Tahoelcemen

The Tahoe Icemen finished the first half at .500, but head coach Mickey Lang is ready for his club to step up its game for the remainder of the season.

"The second half will be a much different story for the Icemen," said Lang. "The first half includes a lot of giving players opportunities to earn roles and spots, and I believe with these opportunities being handed out in some situations we may be sacrificing wins, but that's okay in my book.

"We are developing players and at the end of the play, everyone makes the playoffs according to league rules."

Lang's belief that the first half is mostly for development is a unique approach to the schedule. The fact that every team in the Northwest Division qualifies for the postseason allows plenty of time for growing pains.

Lang also referenced last year's squad, which improved its play after a rough first half and eventually won a first-round playoff series.

"During the second half, like last year, we will be dialed in," he said. "We are not racing against West Sound or anyone else, we are focused on the Icemen.

Tahoe has been inconsistent, but it has the talent to beat the best teams in the WSHL. As Lang mentioned the Icemen "beat Ogden for two games for 50 minutes and beat Idaho, but also lost to Southern Oregon."

The Icemen will look to establish some consistency throughout the second half. They need just one more victory to surpass last season's win total and have a shot to finish over .500 for the first time since the franchise's inaugural season when it was known as the Bay Area Seals.

WEST SOUND WARRIORS (18-14-1, 37 pts)

www.WestSoundWarriors.com

@WS_Warriors

The West Sound Warriors lost two of their first three games in their first weekend of play in the new year.

The Warriors split their two-game series against Bellingham before suffering a 5-3 setback against Seattle on Sunday.

Forward Connor Wherrett (18-14-37) is having solid year in his second campaign with head coach Ty Smith. The Canton, Michigan product already has career highs in goals, assists, and points after playing under Smith with the Butte Cobras last season.

Wherrett is one of several West Sound scorers having great seasons that have been a bit overshadowed by 50-point scorers Erik Safstrom (21-35-56) and Harri Koll (27-26-53). Other notable offensive contributors include Mattias Wikstrom (12-35-47), Samuel Pelech (14-25-39), Alec Johnson (11-21-32), and Bryce Ebert (11-10-21).

The Warriors defense needs to get better. They are giving up over four goals per game to opponents, which is middle-of-the-pack in the WSHL. If it weren't for the fact that the Warriors share the division lead with 152 goals scored, the subpar defense would come back to bite them more often.

West Sound has a tough series on the road against Idaho this weekend. The three games will serve as a measuring stick for Smith's team. The Warriors have looked like a contender at times, but are losing too many divisional games to be considered a threat to the IceCats at the top of the division.

--- Jared Tennant for Harrington Sports Media