

# NORTHWEST DIVISION QUARTERFINAL PREVIEW



Photo provided by: Mark Mauno

## **#6 SOUTHERN OREGON SPARTANS @ #3 BELLINGHAM BLAZERS**

Best-of-three series/all games at Bellingham Sportsplex – Bellingham, WA

GAME 1 Friday, March 16 7:35 p.m.

GAME 2 Saturday, March 17 1:45 p.m.

GAME 3\* Sunday, March 18 12:35 p.m.

*\*if necessary*

## **SEASON SERIES**

Bellingham 5-0-1, 11 points

Southern Oregon 1-5-0, 2 points

November 3 Southern Oregon 3 @ Bellingham 2 (OT)

November 4 Southern Oregon 4 @ Bellingham 7

November 5 Southern Oregon 1 @ Bellingham 8

February 16 Bellingham 5 @ Southern Oregon 1

February 17 Bellingham 5 @ Southern Oregon 2  
February 18 Bellingham 2 @ Southern Oregon 0

### **PLAYOFF HISTORY**

Bellingham – The Blazers finished in sixth place in the Northwest Division last season, which was their inaugural campaign in the WSHL. They bowed out early, falling in the first round to an upstart Butte Cobras squad. Bellingham won the Cascade Cup twice in four years in the Northern Pacific Hockey League prior to joining the WSHL.

Southern Oregon – Southern Oregon has qualified for the postseason in five of its six years in the WSHL. In their first season in the league, the Spartans lost to Idaho in the Northwest Division final but qualified for the Thorne Cup tournament, where they were defeated by Idaho once again in the semifinal. Southern Oregon has been eliminated in the division semifinal round the past three years, with series losses to Missoula and Butte, two clubs that are no longer in the league.

### **BELLINGHAM BLAZERS**

Head coach: Mark Collins  
28-20-3, 2nd place (tied) – Northwest Division  
228 GF / 221 GA

### **BELLINGHAM SPECIAL TEAMS**

POWER PLAY 45/220 (20.5%, 15th in WSHL)  
PENALTY KILL 155/211 (73.5%, 19th in WSHL – 9 SHG)

### **KEY PLAYERS**

F Ruslan Novruzov (53-49-102; second in the Northwest Division in scoring), F Ilya Abubakirov (38-44-82), F Jamahl Eakett (32-31-63), F Robbie Eichelberger (16-37-53), F Timothy Prexler (7-44-51), D Jacob Mabaquiao (0-33-33), D Samuel Whitehouse (8-17-25), G Edward Coffey (12-7-1/3.83/.871)

### **SOUTHERN OREGON SPARTANS**

Head coach: Denis Creighton  
12-38-1, 6th place – Northwest Division  
147 GF / 253 GA

### **SOUTHERN OREGON SPECIAL TEAMS**

POWER PLAY 40/275 (14.5%, 21st in WSHL)  
PENALTY KILL 51/277 (76.9%, 17th in WSHL – 9 SHG)

## **KEY PLAYERS**

F Joel Holmberg (32-35-67), F Yanneck Kumli (19-28-47, 148 PIMs), F Matej Valicek (9-4-13, 189 PIMs in 34 GP), D Axel Low (8-29-37), D Jakub Mecir (4-20-24, 190 PIMs), G Austin Toussaint (8-22-1/4.68/.884)

## **ANALYSIS**

For the first time ever, the Bellingham Blazers and Southern Oregon Spartans will battle it out in the WSHL playoffs. Bellingham is looking to win its first playoff series in the league, while Southern Oregon is trying to qualify for the division semifinals and possibly win a series in that round for the first time since 2013.

The Blazers are coming into the series as one of the hottest teams in the division with wins in 14 of their last 16 games, including an impressive 3-2 shootout victory over powerhouse Idaho. Bellingham also dominated the season series against Southern Oregon, winning five of the six matchups and managing to secure a point in its lone loss back on November 3.

Despite tying Tahoe for the second-best record in the division, the Blazers were relegated to the third seed via tiebreaker. They earned the right to home-ice advantage in this series, but narrowly missed out on the coveted first-round bye.

Blazers Head Coach Mark Collins knows how previous meetings between the two clubs have gone, but he's preparing his players for a tough series.

"I am expecting Southern Oregon to come out and give everything they have," Collins said. "They are a team that, any time we've played them, they have worked a full 60 minutes without question. Just that in itself means we have to be sharp, and we certainly need to play better than we did last weekend."

Southern Oregon, meanwhile, is a team that struggles to score consistently. After a regular season in which they averaged under three goals per game, the Spartans will need their offense to step up this weekend.

But the Spartans probably will not win this series with their offense. Their fortunes rely on the play of starting netminder Austin Toussaint, who has single-handedly carried them to victory on several occasions this season.

If Toussaint is fully on his game, Southern Oregon becomes a difficult team to beat. The third-year veteran had one of the marquee performances of his career this

season when he stopped 84 of 86 shots in an overtime loss to Idaho. Yes, it took an insane 86 shots for the best team in the Northwest Division to get the best of Toussaint, and he still earned his team a point.

Collins hopes the Blazers faithful will pack the rink this weekend. He credits the Bellingham fans for motivating his players in big games.

"Home ice is definitely nice when we have a lot of fans up here, and it helps get the boys pumped up," Collins said.

--- *Jared Tennant for Harrington Sports Media*