

WSHL NORTHWEST DIVISION SEMIFINAL PREVIEW



Photo provided by: Mark Mauno

#3 BELLINGHAM BLAZERS @ #2 TAHOE ICEMEN

Best-of-three series/all games at South Lake Tahoe Ice Arena - South Lake Tahoe, CA

GAME 1 Friday, March 23 7:00 p.m.

GAME 2 Saturday, March 24 7:00 p.m.

GAME 3* Sunday, March 25 2:30 p.m.

**if necessary*

SEASON SERIES

Tahoe 6-0-0, 12 points

Bellingham 0-5-1, 1 point

October 20 Bellingham 3 @ Tahoe 7

October 21 Bellingham 6 @ Tahoe 7 (OT)

October 22 Bellingham 1 @ Tahoe 6

November 17 Tahoe 4 @ Bellingham 2

November 18 Tahoe 4 @ Bellingham 3

November 19 Tahoe 4 @ Bellingham 3

PLAYOFF HISTORY

Tahoe - In 2013, the Bay Area Seals finished second in the Pacific Division in their inaugural season and rode a wave of momentum all the way to the Thorne Cup Championship game, where they fell to Idaho. That season remains the most successful in Icemen franchise history. Last year, Tahoe broke a three-year playoff drought and won its first-round series against Vancouver before being swept by Idaho in the division semifinals.

Bellingham - The Blazers finished sixth in the Northwest Division last season, their first 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 before joining the WSHL.

TAHOE ICEMEN

Head coach: Mickey Lang

28-20-3, 2nd place (tied) - Northwest Division

241 GF / 226 GA

TAHOE SPECIAL TEAMS

POWER PLAY 67/276 (24.3%, 8th in WSHL)

PENALTY KILL 251/320 (78.4%, 13th in WSHL - 18 SHG)

KEY PLAYERS

F Paul Frys (51-68-119), F Danylo Moroz (24-35-59), F Mitch Hunt (12-20-32), F Easton Easterson (17-13-30), D Phillip Heisse III (25-39-64), D Jackson Oleson (12-22-34), G Wade Conlan (13-12-0/4.00/.899)

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%, 14th in WSHL)

PENALTY KILL 155/211 (73.5%, 18th 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)

ANALYSIS

When the regular season ended a couple of weeks ago, the Bellingham Blazers and Tahoe Icemen owned identical records. If it wasn't for Tahoe's six-game sweep of the

season series, Bellingham easily could have been the team to earn a first-round bye. But the Icemen managed to win each regular-season matchup between the two clubs despite a few close calls.

Tahoe boasts plenty of star power at the top of its roster, led by captain Paul Frys and veteran blueliner Phil Heisse. The Icemen rely heavily on their top scorers, which also include Danylo Moroz and Jackson Oleson, but the rest of their roster has proven it can provide offense when needed. After all, it took more than just a handful of players for the Icemen to finish with 59 points, the most in team history.

"I'm expecting that our hard work and preparation will help us advance," said Tahoe Head Coach and General Manager Mickey Lang. "It won't be easy. While we are confident because we beat them during the regular season, we know they've improved as a team. On the flip side, we have improved as well."

Although none of the first-round series around the WSHL needed the full three games, this matchup seems to have a good chance at going the distance. Although Bellingham has yet to defeat Tahoe this year, it did not play the Icemen in the second half. The Blazers showed they were a different team after the holiday break, as evidenced by an 11-game winning streak that included an undefeated month of February. Tahoe has yet to see this new-look Bellingham squad in person, and that should be worrisome for Lang and his players heading into this weekend.

Overall, Bellingham has won 16 of its last 18 games, but it has not yet proven it can beat Tahoe. The Blazers will have that opportunity this weekend, but they won't have the luxury of home-ice advantage, which they enjoyed in their two-game sweep of Southern Oregon last weekend. The Blazers won the opening matchup of that series 8-2 before pulling off a narrow 4-3 victory to clinch it.

Bellingham Head Coach Mark Collins was not satisfied with his team's play last weekend despite the sweep.

"Honestly, I wasn't terribly impressed with our performance," Collins said. "When we had the puck, we were able to score some nice goals, but our play away from the puck and defensively wasn't very good. We need to be a lot better this weekend."

Collins is well aware of the overall talent of his opponent this weekend, and he knows it's going to be a tough series.

"Tahoe plays harder than I suspect Southern Oregon would, and they have plenty of guys that can score as well," Collins continued. "They are a pretty well-rounded team that is physical and does well on the power play. We will just need to get back to playing the right way and picking our spots to take chances."

This is another series that could go either way. Neither team owns a clear advantage, but Bellingham will have to get over the mental hurdle of losing all six games to Tahoe in the regular season. As Collins mentioned, the Icemen's power play is dangerous. Bellingham will need to stay disciplined to stay in the series, because Tahoe has proven it can score at any time while on the man advantage.

--- *Jared Tennant for Harrington Sports Media*