

WSHL WEEKLY NOTES 03.09.18 – WESTERN DIVISION



Photo provided by: Mark Mauno

FRESNO MONSTERS (30-17-1, 61 pts)

@WSHLMonsters

www.FresnoMonsters.com

Last weekend saw the Fresno Monsters nearly pull off a massive sweep of Ontario. The Monsters won the first two games in the series before dropping the finale last Sunday, 4-1.

The loss essentially knocked Fresno out of contention for a first-round postseason bye. Ontario is set to take on sixth-place San Diego in a two-game set this weekend and needs just one point to clinch the bye.

Still, the Monsters can't be too disappointed with the results. They proved once again they have enough talent to outplay any team in the Western Division.

"I feel we're peaking at the right time, but we have to stay focused on the game and have no other distractions, and we need everyone to chip in and be committed," said Fresno Head Coach Kevin Kaminski. "It was a tough loss to Ontario, but it's not the end of the world."

Fresno will play its last series of the regular season this weekend against Seattle on the road. The Totems own a record far below .500, but Kaminski will make sure his players bring their best effort.

"We need to finish strong against Seattle, take pride in the little things, and keep having good habits," he said.

As far as the playoffs go, the Monsters will almost certainly host San Diego in a best-of-three first-round series. Fresno has won five of six games against the Sabers, with the lone loss coming back in mid-October.

Assuming the Monsters win that series, they will probably be tasked with a second-round series against Ontario.

"We've played the top teams in the division pretty tough all year and are pretty evenly matched," added Kaminski. "We need to play Monster hockey for 60 minutes and execute the game plan."

LONG BEACH BOMBERS (33-11-4, 70 pts)

@LBBombersHockey

www.JrBombers.org

The Long Beach Bombers were able to clinch at least a share of their second consecutive Western Division title last weekend with a three-game sweep of Phoenix.

Netminder Spencer Kozlowski led the way with three consecutive shutouts of the Knights, making 100 saves in total as he stretched his shutout streak to four games. Heading into the series, Kozlowski was coming off a 25-save shutout of Valencia.

Not often does a goaltender come into a new club and immediately dominate, but Kozlowski has posted a 6-3-0 record to go along with a 1.80/.950 slash line and four shutouts since joining the Bombers.

Kozlowski's play has given the Bombers one of the best goaltending duos in the league, as veteran Domenic Bosetti (3.52/.898) has had to spend some time on the bench as of late due to the new goalie's dominant play.

"Spencer's presence has, essentially, allowed us to clinch the Western Division," said Long Beach Head Coach Chris White. "Having home ice is extremely important to his success, and his solid play has allowed us to ride the hot goalie.

"We feel very confident going into the Thorne Cup playoffs with our goaltending tandem."

To clinch the division outright, the Bombers need just one point in this weekend's three-game series against Valencia.

If that doesn't happen, which seems a little unlikely considering two of the games will take place in Long Beach, the Bombers will need Ontario to leave at least one point on the table in its series against San Diego this weekend.

Former Long Beach defenseman Ryan Orgel recently became the first Bombers alum to sign with an NCAA Division I program. Orgel, who played with the Bombers in 2012-13, will be joining the University of Denver Pioneers.

ONTARIO AVALANCHE (32-15-2, 66 pts)

@TmOntAvs

www.OntarioAvalanche.com

Even though they dropped two of three games to Fresno, the Ontario Avalanche have put themselves in position to lock up a first-round bye this weekend.

The Avs looked as though they were headed toward three losses in a row to the Monsters but managed to regroup and salvage the series with a 4-1 victory last Sunday.

Ontario only needs to earn one point during its home-and-home series against San Diego this weekend, which will begin on Friday evening at Ontario Center Ice Arena.

"At the risk of coming off overconfident, I'm pretty much anticipating at least one win this weekend, and frankly will be disappointed if we don't win both," said Avs Head Coach Rob O'Rourke. "I'm anticipating a playoff matchup with Fresno again at our rink.

"Sunday's win was huge, but Fresno took the first two, so that would be a very tough series without a doubt. There is no easy way out of our division."

Expecting a sweep this weekend is more about O'Rourke's confidence in his players than it is a knock on San Diego. The Avalanche have provided plenty of reasons to make their coach believe they should win both games.

Forward Jesse Zaharichuk (27-53-80) will most likely finish as Ontario's leading scorer. The veteran player was brought in to lead and to provide offense this season after spending the last three years in the Western Hockey League.

Zaharichuk has exceeded expectations and been one of the biggest reasons for the Avs' success throughout the season.

PHOENIX KNIGHTS (23-26-2, 48 pts)

@PhoenixKnightsJrA

www.PhoenixKnightsHockey.com

The Phoenix Knights' playoff fate was sealed last weekend when they failed to pick up a point against Long Beach and Valencia posted a sweep of San Diego.

The Knights will travel to Valencia for a best-of-three series against the new-look Flyers. It should be a competitive matchup, as the Flyers have shown plenty of improvement recently.

The Knights, who have completed their regular-season schedule, will get the chance to rest their legs and prepare for the next weekend's postseason opener.

Anthony Masanotti (40-16-56) finished his first campaign as Phoenix's leader in both goals and points. He was closely followed by Michael Caravella (13-38-51) and Andrius Bermejo (15-35-50), as the Knights featured a trio of 50-point scorers.

Phoenix has set up a GoFundMe page to help with the costs of travel for their first-round series. You can find a link to the page at the Knights' website, www.phoenixknighthockey.com.

SAN DIEGO SABERS (4-41-4, 12 pts)

@sdsabershockey

www.SanDiegoSabersHockey.com

The San Diego Sabers were swept by Valencia last weekend despite giving the Flyers a tough series. San Diego lost the first two games by two goals each and dropped the third and final contest by three goals.

It has been a long year for the Sabers, but this season's format gives every team in the league a shot at the playoffs. A win or two in the playoffs would make much of the pain from the regular season disappear.

San Diego is headed to Fresno for a first-round series. Gateway Ice Center has proven to be one of the Western Division's more difficult venues in which to play, and the Monsters' roster is littered with talent.

Still, weirder things have happened, and the Sabers would only need two wins to give Fresno a premature end to its season.

Before it can think about the playoffs, though, San Diego is focused on this weekend's home-and-home series against Ontario. The Avs need a point out of the series to clinch the second seed in the division.

Much of the Sabers' fortunes will depend on the play of star blueliner Karel Kankovsky. The Czech Republic native has 49 points (15-34-49) through 49 games, making him the only Saber to score at a point-per-game pace this season.

Kankovsky needs to be great, but hockey is a team sport. Michael Kolarik (19-23-42), who leads the team in goals, Ondrej Imrich (12-23-35), David Grindstaff (13-15-28), and the rest of the Sabers will need to be on top of their game in order to upset Ontario or Fresno over the next couple of weeks.

VALENCIA FLYERS (25-19-4, 54 pts)

@valenciaflyers

www.ValenciaFlyers.com

The Valencia Flyers' three-game sweep of San Diego last weekend allowed them to clinch home-ice advantage in their first-round series against Phoenix and put them back on the right track as the regular season winds down.

The Flyers have just one series left, a three-game set against Long Beach this weekend. The first game will be played at Ice Station in Valencia, but the Flyers will have to play in Long Beach for the final two contests.

It seems as if Valencia is always at its best playing the Bombers. The rivalry dates back several years, but even after their roster transformation, the Flyers gave Long Beach all it could handle in a 2-0 Bombers win on February 27.

Valencia still owns above-.500 records on home ice and in enemy territory. Its 13-9-2 mark at home is solid, but its 12-10-2 showing on the road is especially impressive in the rugged Western Division.

Ever since trading away most of their star power, the Flyers have become a team that doesn't rely on just a small handful of players. They need a complete team effort to pick up wins.

Forwards Daniel Klinecky (17-31-48) and Dylan San Augustin (19-20-39) are Valencia's top two scorers, and they've had to carry a much heavier load since the trade deadline.

San Augustin is the only Flyer averaging at least one point per game. Valencia's goaltending situation is solid with Mack Willy (3.76,.906) leading the way, but its offense isn't always a sure thing. The Flyers' attack will need to step up if Valencia wants to take down the Knights in next weekend's playoff series.

--- *Jared Tennant for Harrington Sports Media*