

# WSHL WESTERN DIVISION SEMIFINAL PREVIEW



Photo provided by: Mark Mauno

## **#5 PHOENIX KNIGHTS @ #1 LONG BEACH BOMBERS**

Best-of-three series/all games at The Rinks - Lakewood, CA

GAME 1 Thursday, March 22 7:45 p.m.

GAME 2 Friday, March 23 7:45 p.m.

GAME 3\* Saturday, March 24 1:20 p.m.

*\*if necessary*

### **SEASON SERIES**

Long Beach 6-0-0, 12 points

Phoenix 0-6-0, 0 points

October 14 Long Beach 8 @ Phoenix 0

October 15 Long Beach 8 @ Phoenix 2

October 16 Long Beach 7 @ Phoenix 1

March 1 Phoenix 0 @ Long Beach 4

March 2 Phoenix 0 @ Long Beach 5

March 3 Phoenix 0 @ Long Beach 8

## **PREVIOUS PLAYOFF MEETINGS**

The Bombers and Knights have not previously met in the Thorne Cup playoffs.

## **PLAYOFF HISTORY**

Long Beach - Long Beach has won the Western Division playoffs in each of the last two seasons. Last season, they were eliminated in the round-robin portion of the Thorne Cup tournament, and the year before they fell in the Thorne Cup Semifinals.

Phoenix - The Knights have missed out on the playoffs twice in the last four years, including last season when they finished seventh in the then-eight-team Western Division. Phoenix hasn't had much success in the postseason beyond 2013-14, when they won the Mountain Division and made it all the way to the Thorne Cup semifinal, falling to eventual champion El Paso. While the Knights franchise hasn't done much in the postseason, the Phoenix Polar Bears' seven Thorne Cup titles between 2001 and 2010 are the most in WSHL history.

## **LONG BEACH BOMBERS**

Head coach: Chris White

36-11-4, 1st place - Western Division

263 GF / 158 GA

## **LONG BEACH SPECIAL TEAMS**

POWER PLAY 56/217 (25.8%, 5th in WSHL)

PENALTY KILL 143/174 (82.2%, 9th in WSHL - 9 SHG)

## **KEY PLAYERS**

F Tomas Urbanec (42-49-91), F Miroslav Rohlik (39-43-82), F Artem Korolev (23-48-71), F Parker Moskal (31-37-68), D Amir Burguev (12-46-58), D Erik Lundgren (11-41-52), D Anton Ahlin (11-36-47), G Spencer Kozlowski (8-3-0/3.49/.909; .949 save percentage since joining Long Beach), G Domenic Bosetti (22-8-2/3.47/.899)

## **PHOENIX KNIGHTS**

Head coach: Colten St. Clair

23-26-2, 5th place - Western Division

171 GF / 240 GA

## **PHOENIX SPECIAL TEAMS**

POWER PLAY 37/235 (15.7%, 20th in WSHL)

PENALTY KILL 170/215 (79.1%, 13th in WSHL - 11 SHG)

## **KEY PLAYERS**

F Anthony Masanotti (40-16-56, most single-season goals in franchise history), F Michael Caravella (13-38-51), F Andrius Bermejo (15-35-50), F Nolan Twerdoclib (11-21-32), F Ian McCollum (18-11-29), D Chase Gillaspie (2-11-13), G Rhett Bruckner (16-8-2/4.06/.889)

## **ANALYSIS**

The Phoenix Knights and Long Beach Bombers have never met in the WSHL playoffs, but that will change this weekend as the Knights travel to Long Beach for a best-of-three Western Division semifinal against the first-place Bombers.

The Knights defeated Valencia in two games last week, winning their first postseason series since 2014. It was a tough series, but Phoenix managed to squeeze out one-goal victories in both contests, including a 5-4 overtime win in the opening match that set the tone.

Knights first-year Head Coach Colten St. Clair pointed out a few specific areas that his team will need to focus on this weekend.

"We're going to need discipline," St. Clair said. "No dumb penalties. If we don't take dumb penalties in a game, we have a good chance of winning. It has been up and down for us, but obviously you want to have your penalty kill going and power play to be scoring. It's common sense that that's what wins you games.

"Shift lengths are going to be big for us," St. Clair continued. "I believe we are arguably in the best shape of any team in our division. Fifty-plus games into the season is a lot, so the shorter shifts we have, the more guys we can get into the game."

The Bombers were in a slump for much of the second half, but a seven-game winning streak to close the regular season allowed them to comfortably clinch the Western Division title. Long Beach seems to have recovered from whatever ailed it after the WSHL Showcase, but it knows the Knights are no pushover. After all, any team that employs players like 40-goal scorer Anthony Masanotti and talented offensive threats such as Michael Caravella and Andrius Bermejo is a force to be reckoned with.

"Phoenix's roster has definitely improved over the course of the year," said Bombers Head Coach Chris White. "However, I think their success is coming from the team buying into the expectations and culture set by the coaching staff."

Masanotti could be one of the biggest "X" factors in this series. The rookie has seemingly come out of nowhere to rejuvenate the Knights.

"We need to always know where Masanotti is," White said. "He is their top offensive threat and scored both of the game-winners last week in Valencia. They also have some nice complementary pieces around him.

"For us, we'll be looking to our large group of '97 birth years to lead the way. We feel our depth is going to be the key to our success coming out of the West. Our ability to play simple and make smart decisions with the puck will be crucial."

The Bombers opened the month of March with a dominant three-game sweep of the Knights that saw them post three consecutive shutouts and outscore Phoenix by a 17-0 margin. It was certainly an encouraging series for Long Beach, but it knows the regular season doesn't mean much when the playoffs begin.

"We used that last home series against Phoenix as preparation for a home playoff series, and I was pleased with our play," White added. "Of course, that's easy to say with three shutouts, but it went far beyond the scoreboard. We are focused on taking care of business on Thursday, nothing more and nothing less."

If Bombers netminder Spencer Kozlowski is at the top of his game, the Knights are in for a tough series. Kozlowski has proven to be one of the best in the league since being acquired at the trade deadline, and it's hard to see any team beating him when he's firing on all cylinders.

*--- Jared Tennant for Harrington Sports Media*