

WSHL DIVISION FINAL WRAP-UP; March 29-31



Photo provided by: Mark Mauno

It was four series, four sweeps in last weekend's WSHL division finals. While there was some drama, three number one seeds and a two-seed won their respective divisional playoffs in the end. The most entertaining and competitive series came out of the Mountain Division, where Ogden defeated Utah after back-to-back overtime wins.

Other than that, the results were mostly expected. Long Beach took down Daylon Mannon and the Fresno Monsters, Idaho continued to bully the rest of the Northwest Division, and El Paso worked around a game-one scare from Oklahoma City to earn a spot in the Thorne Cup tournament rather than backing into it with an automatic bid as the host team.

Three of the four regular-season division champions ended up winning their divisional playoffs, with Ogden being the lone non-division winner to win their division in the postseason. The Mustangs missed out on a regular-season division title by just two points, so it's hardly a surprise that they're the last team standing in the Mountain Division.

As division champions, Long Beach, Idaho, Ogden, and El Paso have earned spots in the Thorne Cup tournament. The remaining two slots will be filled by Oklahoma City and Utah. OKC earns the Mid-Western Division spot because El Paso, which won the

division, has an automatic bid in the tournament as the host team. Utah will be participating in the tournament as the wild card team after earning the most regular-season points of any team outside of the other five Thorne Cup qualifiers.

WESTERN DIVISION FINAL

#3 Fresno Monsters (33-17-1) at

#1 Long Beach Bombers (36-11-4)

GAME 1 Thursday, March 29 - Long Beach 4, Fresno 0

GAME 2 Friday, March 30 - Long Beach 8, Fresno 2

Long Beach quiets Fresno to win third straight Western Division playoff

After looking vulnerable at times during the second half of the season, the Long Beach Bombers have been unstoppable during their surge through the Western Division playoffs. The Bombers outscored Fresno 12-2 over the course of a two-game sweep in last weekend's Western Division final to advance to the Thorne Cup tournament for the second straight season.

Long Beach set the tone for the series when forward Ryan Gil scored just 44 seconds into the contest. Monsters goaltender Max Karlenzig recovered with 13 saves in the opening frame, but the Bombers were able to add a pair of goals in the second period from William Daigneault and Artem Korolev, putting them in the driver's seat with a 3-0 advantage heading into the final period.

Gil added his second of the game about five minutes into the third period and the Bombers cruised to a 4-0 victory in game one.

Fresno threatened throughout the game, but Long Beach netminder Spencer Kozlowski stopped everything he saw. Kozlowski held Fresno's star forwards Cody Key and Daylon Mannon off the scoresheet en route to his first shutout of the postseason. When it was all said and done, Kozlowski posted 35 saves.

Karlenzig stopped 25 of 29 Long Beach attempts while Bombers blueliner Amir Burguev dished out three assists.

The second game started off in a similar manner, with Long Beach getting on the board just over a minute into the contest, this time via a goal from Korolev. Fresno was able to respond this time, though, as Key tied things up exactly 16 minutes into the opening frame.

It was all Long Beach from there, as the Bombers came out of the locker room in the second period with a pair of goals: one from Gil, and another from rookie sensation Miroslav Rohlik that gave the home team a 4-1 edge.

Fresno made things interesting with a tally from Mannon early in the third period to cut the deficit to two, but four straight goals from the Bombers killed any hope of a Monsters rally.

Gil finished the night with a pair of goals and four assists, giving him a 4-5-9 line in the series and a team-leading 7-8-15 this postseason. Five different Bombers collected multiple points in the contest, including a pair of goals and an assist from Korolev and three helpers from Joel Larsson.

Kozlowski stopped 29 of 31 Fresno shots while his counterpart, this time Kyle Franceschini, made 34 saves in the losing effort.

NORTHWEST DIVISION FINAL

#2 Tahoe Icemen (28-20-3) at

#1 Idaho IceCats (44-4-3)

GAME 1 Friday, March 30 - Idaho 6, Tahoe 4

GAME 2 Saturday, March 31 - Idaho 6, Tahoe 2

Idaho continues Northwest Division dominance with series win over Tahoe

For the last six seasons, the Idaho IceCats have been the class of the Northwest Division. They've won six straight division titles and, with last weekend's sweep of the Tahoe Icemen, have won the division playoffs every season for the last six years.

The unprecedented run has been led by IceCats General Manager and Head Coach John Olver, who recruits top-tier talent each season. Olver's efforts have led to five Thorne Cup championships since 2011, and this IceCats squad looks to have the talent to add another trophy to the collection after sweeping a Tahoe group that gave them some trouble during the regular season.

Idaho opened the scoring in game one with a tally from Marcus Jernberg, but Tahoe was able to respond with the tying goal from Easton Easterson just 30 seconds later.

The IceCats regained the lead early in the second period, but the Icemen showed they wouldn't go down without a fight after a pair of goals from Danylo Moroz and

captain Paul Frys over a five-minute stretch to go ahead 3-2 and claim their first (and only) lead of the series.

Idaho recovered nicely with a tying goal from Casper Sjodin, and the two teams remained knotted at three heading into the final period of action.

12 third-period saves from Tahoe's Maximillian Haselbacher weren't enough to stop the IceCats, who scored three times in the first six minutes of the third period to take a commanding 6-3 lead. Moroz added another goal late in the third, but Idaho held on for the 6-4 victory.

IceCats goalie Jacob Hough had a rare rough outing, stopping 15 of 19 shots, but his offense was able to pick him up. Five different Idaho skaters scored, including two goals from Jernberg and multi-point efforts from Sjodin (1-2-3), Blake Nelson (1-1-2), and Matthew Kindred (1-1-2).

Idaho closed out the series the next day with a solid 6-2 win. The IceCats once again opened the scoring with a Kindred goal with just under a minute left in the opening period. Kindred would strike again early in the second before Jackson Oleson put Tahoe on the board and pulled the Icemen back within one.

The IceCats restored their two-goal cushion with a goal from Russel Harren and were in control for the rest of the night. Tahoe would add another goal in the third period, but Idaho's offense proved to be too much for the Icemen and Haselbacher, who made 34 saves in the contest.

Victor Odjal earned the win between the Idaho pipes, stopping 22 of 24 shots. Jackson York added a goal and two assists for the IceCats and Sergei Grebenschikov scored for Tahoe.

MOUNTAIN DIVISION FINAL

#2 Ogden Mustangs (38-12-1) at

#1 Utah Outliers (39-11-1)

GAME 1 Friday, March 30 - Ogden 4, Utah 3 (OT)

GAME 2 Saturday, March 31 - Ogden 2, Utah 1 (OT)

Ogden stuns division-champion Utah with a pair of overtime wins

When the Ogden Mustangs traveled to Acord Ice Arena in West Valley City, Utah for Friday night's Mountain Division Finals opener, they were likely expecting a tight

series against a Utah team that seems like it's finally ready to contend for a Thorne Cup. The Mustangs were able to use strong goaltending and some timely scoring to take down the regular-season Mountain Division champions and punch their ticket to El Paso.

Game one got off to a great start for Ogden when it jumped out to a 2-0 lead after goals from Matus Spodniak and Jacob Laurin. Tymen Edelkoort made 24 saves through the first two frames as the Mustangs began the third period with a two-goal advantage.

The Outliers didn't waste any time in the third, sneaking one past Edelkoort just 13 seconds into the period. Edelkoort would go on to make 15 saves in the third period, but it was not enough as Utah managed to send the game to overtime tied at three goals apiece.

It took just 29 seconds for Laurin to find the back of the net in the extra period. Rhett Rampinelli threw the puck in front of the net from behind the goal line, and Laurin one-timed it past Outliers goalie Dawson Rodin, who finished with 27 saves. It was Laurin's second goal of the game and Rampinelli's second assist.

Jacob Wanstrom netted a pair of goals for Utah, while Brandon Krumpshmid added two assists. Laurin finished with a game-high three points (2-1-3).

Edelkoort made 39 saves as he frustrated an Outliers squad that averaged nearly six goals per game during the regular season.

Ogden scored first in the second game of the series when Ross Bartlett snuck a one-timer through the legs of Rodin in the first period. The score remained 1-0 in favor of the Mustangs until the third period when Zach Dornseifer fired a wrist shot over the blocker of Mustangs goaltender Jonathan Chin off a feed from Jacob Wanstrom.

In overtime, both teams battled but it was Ogden that came up with the clutch goal. Forward Ian Currie stole the puck in the corner before passing it back to defenseman Tyson Liverance, who was waiting at the blue line. Liverance fired a slapshot past Rodin to win the series and send the Mustangs to El Paso.

Rodin made 39 saves in the game, while Chin stopped 36 of the 37 pucks he saw. All in all, it was quite a battle between the two goalies.

Currie assisted on both Mustangs goals in the game. Ammon Anderson logged Ogden's only other assist.

MID-WESTERN DIVISION FINAL

#2 Oklahoma City Blazers (42-7-2) at

#1 El Paso Rhinos (49-1-1)

GAME 1 Friday, March 30 - El Paso 3, Oklahoma City 2

GAME 2 Saturday, March 31 - El Paso 9, Oklahoma City 1

Rhinos earn their way to Thorne Cup tournament with sweep over Blazers

The El Paso Rhinos have had only one legitimate challenger in the Mid-Western Division, and they welcomed that team to Sierra Providence Events Center last weekend for a division final series. Oklahoma City was the only club in the division to beat El Paso this season, and it had the most successful series anyone has had against the Rhinos this season when it took three of six possible points in a three-game set in mid-January.

Good teams find ways to win even when they aren't playing well, and that's exactly what El Paso did in game one. The Blazers out-shot the Rhinos 17-4 in the first period, but the Rhinos headed into the first intermission with a 1-0 lead courtesy of a goal from Jakob Kranabetter and a dominant showing from netminder Filip Krasanovsky.

El Paso added to its lead in the second period with a goal from Leeam Tivers and entered the third period with a two-goal advantage despite being severely out-shot. Another Rhinos goal, this time from Austin Boyle, just three minutes into the third seemed to cement the outcome of the game, but OKC would not go quietly. Travis Hudek and Patrik Tondl each scored within the span of 1:08 to pull the Blazers back within one goal, but the Rhinos defense held on for the 3-2 win.

Krasanovsky played one of the best games of his career, stopping 48 of 50 Blazers shots in a game his team probably shouldn't have won since they were outshot 50-21.

Kranabetter assisted on the Rhinos second goal, making him the only player on either side to post multiple points. For the Blazers, Vitalii Mikhailov added an assist while Bobby Cloutier made 18 saves in the loss.

The following day, El Paso stepped up its game and stifled any doubts that lingered about who was truly the best team in the Mid-Western Division. The Rhinos scored three times in the first period before shaking off a goal from Oklahoma City's Ivan Bondarenko to cruise to a 9-1 win.

The Rhinos three first-period tallies led to a goalie change for the Blazers during the first intermission. Justin Arnold, who made 11 saves, was replaced by Emanuel Hertel-Bauman, who ended the night with 18 saves of his own.

Things got chippy in the second period after Chaseton Sare scored to make it 5-1 in favor of the Rhinos. Three separate fights broke out and resulted in several penalties, including a pair of game misconducts. Things calmed down from there as several roughing penalties were handed out throughout the rest of the game but both teams kept their cool, for the most part.

Like we saw from El Paso on countless occasions throughout the regular season, the win was a demonstration of a complete team effort. Six different Rhinos scored including a hat trick from Sare. Nikita Pintusov contributed a pair of goals while Austin Boyle, Jayze Dundas-Schwartz, Colby Haugen, and Donald Alchin Jr. added one goal each for El Paso.

Austin Simpson dished out three assists for El Paso and Kranabetter, John Erramousse, and Phil Pugliese added a pair of helpers each.

Krasanovsky, who earned a roughing penalty following Sare's goal after getting into it with one of the Blazers forwards, needed to make only 10 saves as OKC managed just 11 shots on goal in the contest.