

WSHL NORTHWEST DIVISION FINAL PREVIEW



Photo provided by: Mark Mauno

#2 TAHOE ICEMEN @ #1 IDAHO ICECATS

Best-of-three series/all games at Manchester Ice Centre - McCall, ID

GAME 1 Friday, March 30 7:00 p.m.

GAME 2 Saturday, March 31 7:00 p.m.

GAME 3* Sunday, April 1 4:00 p.m.

**if necessary*

SEASON SERIES

Idaho 8-0-1, 17 points

Tahoe 1-8-0, 2 points

October 13 Tahoe 4 @ Idaho 5

October 14 Tahoe 3 @ Idaho 7

October 15 Tahoe 2 @ Idaho 6

December 14 Idaho 3 @ Tahoe 2

December 15 Idaho 3 @ Tahoe 4 (OT)

December 16 Idaho 9 @ Tahoe 4

February 1 Idaho 9 @ Tahoe 4

February 2 Idaho 6 @ Tahoe 3

February 3 Idaho 5 @ Tahoe 4

PREVIOUS PLAYOFF MEETINGS

These two franchises met in the playoffs for the first time in 2013, when Idaho beat

Tahoe 4-2 in the Thorne Cup championship game. Idaho and Tahoe also played each other in a division semifinal series last year, which Idaho swept in two games.

PLAYOFF HISTORY

Idaho - The IceCats have a long history of excellence in the WSHL postseason. Idaho has qualified for the Thorne Cup finals in each of the last seven seasons, earning five championships. Idaho has also won eight consecutive division titles, including six in the Northwest Division. For head coach and general manager John Olver, anything less than a championship is below expectations.

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 losing in the division semifinals.

IDAHO ICECATS

Head coach: John Olver

44-4-3, 1st place - Northwest Division

306 GF / 103 GA

IDAHO SPECIAL TEAMS

POWER PLAY 68/234 (29.1%, 3rd in WSHL)

PENALTY KILL 210/240 (87.5%, 3rd in WSHL - 5 SHG)

KEY PLAYERS

F Lance Herring (44-36-80), F Matthew Kindred (21-33-54), F Jacob Hedencrona (21-32-53), F Alexander Piliya (14-35-49), F Kevin Fellows (16-32-48), D Terry Ryder (11-44-55), G Jacob Hough (19-1-1/1.83/.921), G Tyler Matthews (12-2-1/1.58/.944); highest save percentage in 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)

ANALYSIS

The Idaho IceCats have been on a mission this season, and it has resulted in a dominant performance against the Northwest Division. IceCats Head Coach and General Manager John Olver has his club rolling, and they seem to be destined for another run at the Thorne Cup. At the same time, the Tahoe Icemen have shown signs of real improvement. Not long ago the Icemen lost 50 of 52 games, but the hire of head coach Mickey Lang has turned the franchise around.

Tahoe seemed to be the only Northwest Division rival that could give Idaho any trouble throughout the regular season. Although the Icemen lost eight of nine to the IceCats this season, most games were competitive, and five contests were decided by three goals or fewer. If there's one Northwest Division team that's most likely to take down Idaho, it has to be Tahoe.

The Icemen opened their postseason last round with a two-game sweep of Bellingham. The Blazers had been playing very good hockey, but Tahoe quickly humbled them with wins of 5-1 and 9-6. The 15-goal output in the series will probably need to be replicated or improved upon this weekend for the Icemen to have a real chance at winning. Idaho's offensive attack is quite good, and its defense is just as elite as it's been in years past.

"We had a great week of practice leading up to the Bellingham series," Lang said. "Then we stuck to the game plan and everyone contributed."

"Idaho is a great team, so we're preparing for them a little differently than some of the other teams we face," Lang continued. "They have a lot of depth on their team, but we're ready for a challenge. I think every player on our roster will have an impact on the series. Whether it's positive or negative, that's yet to be determined. That's the best things about sports - you can't plan how the game will play out, and anything can happen."

It's been awhile since the IceCats lost in regulation. They carry a jaw-dropping 24-0-2 record since the holiday break into this series. It's clear that, as the underdog, Tahoe will need a lot to go its way to win. Icemen netminder Maximilian Haselbacher's play will have a huge effect on the outcome of this weekend's games. Haselbacher, a recent addition to Tahoe's roster, is getting his first taste of the WSHL playoffs after spending the last three seasons with the Omaha AAA Lancers. He has pushed his way into a starting role for the Icemen and will be facing the IceCats for the first time.

--- *Jared Tennant for Harrington Sports Media*