

NORTHWEST DIVISION SEMIFINAL PREVIEW



Note: The winner of the Southern Oregon-Bellingham series will advance to play the #1 seed Seattle Totems in the Northwest Division Final next week.

**3. SOUTHERN OREGON SPARTANS (18-29-2-2, 60 pts.) @
2. BELLINGHAM BLAZERS (34-14-0-3, 105 pts.)**

Best-of-three series; all games at Bellingham Sportsplex – Bellingham, WA

GAME 1 Friday, March 22 7:05 p.m.

GAME 2 Saturday, March 23 7:05 p.m.

GAME 3 Sunday, March 24 1:35 p.m. (if necessary)

For the vast majority of the regular season, the Bellingham Blazers were in the driver's seat in the race for the Northwest Division title. A late surge from Seattle forced the Blazers out of first place on the final day of the regular season and set them up for a best-of-three division semi-final series against the Southern Oregon

Spartans, a club that has played its best hockey of the season throughout the second half.

Despite dominating the competition for most of the season, the Blazers now face an uphill battle to get to the Thorne Cup tournament. They need to take down a Spartans club that has logged two straight wins over them before potentially looking for revenge on Seattle in the division finals in a series that will see the Totems hold home ice advantage. Bellingham's veteran-laden roster needs to get back on top of its game over the next couple of weeks or it risks failing to capitalize on the best opportunity it's ever had to qualify for the Thorne Cup tournament.

Last year, Bellingham swept Southern Oregon in a division quarterfinal series before falling to the Tahoe Icemen in the second round. The Blazers are looking to make the deepest playoff run in franchise history while the Spartans are searching for the first division finals appearance since 2013.

For the Blazers, the trio of Timothy Prexler (42-79-121), Jamahl Eackett (50-64-114), and Thomas Steven (51-31-82) has the potential to completely change the outlook of any playoff series. All three players are having career years in their final year of eligibility and will be looking to do some damage in the postseason. Robbie Eichelberger (19-60-79) and Christoffer Fogelberg (29-30-59) round out Bellingham's key group of scorers that contribute the Blazers' top-five offense.

Despite taking only three of nine games against the Blazers on the year, including a pair of overtime wins, the Spartans have reason to feel confident heading into this weekend's series. They ended the regular season with victories in five of their last six games and took two of three games the last time they played Bellingham on the road in early February.

"We have to play extremely physical," said Spartans Head Coach Ken Hoey. "We have to limit their scoring chances off the rush. When facing a skilled, fast-skating team like the Blazers, this is imperative. Our defense is going to have to be terrific, and our goaltending needs to be spectacular."

It wouldn't be a surprise to see Hoey lean heavily on Chris O'Shaughnessey against the Blazers. The New York native has had some spectacular performances lately and owns a 1.22 goals-against average to go along with a .955 save percentage, posting a perfect 4-0-0 record. Kayden Pickles (3.56/.902) and Gabriel Lessard (4.32/.864) provide Hoey and Co. with options and depth between the pipes.

Defensively, captain Axel Low will be counted on to produce on both ends of the ice in his final WSHL postseason. The two-year veteran has exploded for a career-high 82 points (27-55-82), making him the highest-scoring blueliner in the league. Spartans Assistant Coach Matt Reed made some glowing remarks on the impact Low has had on the organization.

“Axel is an absolute warrior that shows up to play every single night,” he said. “He’s our captain and team leader in every sense of the word. He’s an accountable player and has proved he’s the best defenseman in the WSHL. His dominance on the ice is only surpassed by the character he is off the ice. He skates with confidence against every single team he plays. The sky is the limit for him, and we wish him the absolute best moving forward.”

Forward Eric Vanderhoff (34-48-72) is tied with Low as the Spartans two point leaders. Logan Emery (30-45-75) is not far behind while Hayden Moistner (20-33-53) completes Southern Oregon’s group of 50-point scorers. Trade deadline acquisitions like Matej Valicek (8-14-22, 18 GP) and Vladislav Polyashov (7-9-16, 12 GP) among others have immediately stepped in and contributed offensively.

If Bellingham can regain the form it had through most of the regular season, it should be considered a favorite in this series. But it would be a mistake to count out a Southern Oregon club that has benefitted from strong leadership and has shown that it’s capable of defeating the Blazers.

---Jared Tennant for Harrington Sports Media