

# WESTERN DIVISION SEMIFINAL PREVIEW



*WSHL standings are expressed W-L-OTW-OTL (“W” and “L” represent regulation wins and losses; shootouts are included in overtime results). Three points are awarded for a regulation win, two for an overtime win and one for an overtime loss.*

## **4. ONTARIO AVALANCHE (17-28-3-3) @ 1. LONG BEACH BOMBERS (35-8-6-2)**

*Best-of-three series; all games at The Rinks, Lakewood (Long Beach)*

GAME 1 Thursday, March 21 7:45 p.m.

GAME 2 Friday, March 22 7:45 p.m.

GAME 3 Saturday, March 23 6:30 p.m. (if necessary)

The Long Beach Bombers wrapped up their third consecutive regular season division title and now they begin pursuit of their fourth straight division playoff title.

The WSHL's longest-tenured member is chomping at the bit to make a long playoff run after reaching the Thorne Cup semifinal game in two of the last three seasons – including a year ago. They take their first steps of the post-season this week with a best-of-three Western Division Semifinal series against the Ontario Avalanche.

The Bombers have offensive weapons like playmaker Artem Korolev (25-67-92) setting up snipers Tomas Urbanec (41-41-82) and Gennady Malashenko (39-43-82), who scored 80 goals between them, and 33-goal-scorer Erik Sillerstrom, who was fourth on the team in scoring.

Defensemen Emil Karlsson (9-33-42) and Filip Nordin (4-31-35) help get the puck moving out of the Bombers end. That prolific offense (262 goals as a team) helped the Bombers win 41 of their 51 regular season games (35 of them in regulation).

The Avalanche, meanwhile, sustained a steady pace over the second half of the season after a slow 5-14-0-2 start. Beginning with the WSHL showcase, the Avalanche won half of their remaining 30 games (12-14-3-1).

Ontario will put a balanced scoring attack, tight defensive system and under-rated goaltender up against one of the league's elite teams. They will need to play at their best to have a chance of upsetting the Bombers but, make no mistake, they are capable of doing it.

The Avalanche did not see any player reach 20 goals and Brett Ruiz (15-27-42) and Logan Corrigan (14-28-42) tied for the team lead with just 42 points.

In goal, Connor Duffy has been one of the more underrated netminders in the WSHL. He managed to win 13 games despite mediocre goal support. The Avalanche scored the fewest goals in the Western Division (183), but Duffy's 3.80 goals-against average and even .900 save percentage kept the team in a lot of games – especially in the second half of the season.

Surprisingly, the Bombers and Avalanche have never met in the post-season despite both teams participating in the Western Division playoffs in each of the last six years.

The Bombers won eight of nine games between the two teams in the 2018-19 regular season, but three of the eight losses for Ontario were by a single goal. As a matter of fact, each of the last two meetings were decided by one goal: 5-4 and 2-1 Bombers wins.

Long Beach general manager and head coach Chris White says his team will focus on their own game and not necessarily what happened the last time they played the Avalanche.

“At this point in the season we need to play a certain way to have success,” said White. “Our opponent isn’t going to be the focal point. Our decision-making and effort will be the keys to winning games. Ontario just scored 14 goals in their sweep of Valencia, so we need be ready for a battle.”

Long Beach’s workhorse goaltender Domenic Bosetti (28-5-2, 2.34, .933), who ranked second in the WSHL in wins and save percentage, only played 40 minutes over the final four games of the regular season schedule. White says that was by design, but not an indication of an injury or a change of strategy when it comes to the team’s goaltending.

“We wanted to give Matthew Genter the opportunity to experience carrying the load for a three-game stretch before heading into playoffs,” he said. “Bosetti has played very well against Ontario and he’ll be ready to go on Thursday.”

**3. SAN DIEGO SABERS (17-27-4-3) @  
2. FRESNO MONSTERS (31-16-3-1)**

*Best-of-three series; all games at Gateway Ice Center – Fresno*

GAME 1 Friday, March 22 7:00 p.m.

GAME 2 Saturday, March 23 5:30 p.m.

GAME 3 Sunday, March 24 10:00 a.m. (if necessary)

The Fresno Monsters and San Diego Sabers both had last week off to rest up and prepare for their meeting in the 2/3 seed Western Division Semifinal series.

Fresno is hoping to return to their playoff success of the past. Between 2009-2015, Fresno finished atop the Western Division standings in five of

six seasons and also played in the division playoff final five times in that six-year span, winning three of them.

The Monsters have not finished in first place, and have played in the division final just one time, in the last four years. They lost the 2018 Western Division Final in two games to Long Beach.

Only one time in the last six years have the Monsters scored fewer goals than they did this season (227). Three Fresno skaters reached the 20-goal plateau and just one player registered more than 52 points (leading scorer Petr Philippov 33-42-75). Stanislav Danaev (26-26-52) and Dustin Truex (21-29-50) were the other 20-goal scorers.

But, while the team is not scoring as much as it has in the past, they reduced their goals-against for the second straight season (239 > 189 > 172).

Tyler Mathews assumed a larger share of the goaltending duties in the second half – not because Max Karlenzig (3.26 GAA/.908 SV%) was not performing, but because Mathews was so sharp. Since January 10, Mathews is 9-2-1 with a 2.48 goals-against average and .936 save percentage.

Monsters head coach Kevin Kaminski knows Mathews has the hot hand and doesn't plan on complicating matters when it comes to naming a starting goaltender for Friday's Game One.

"Mathews has played phenomenal down the stretch so he will start Friday," Kaminski said. "This time of year I feel we need to go with the guy that's hot."

But first things first. The Monsters need to tackle their first challenge of the post-season this weekend when they host the third-seeded Sabers.

Fresno made good use of the time off last week, and also the fact that they played San Diego so recently. The Monsters and Sabers played their final two regular season games against each other March 9-10 in San Diego.

"It was good to get some rest to heal up and do some team bonding," said Kaminski. "We broke down the (San Diego) game tape to prepare in all aspects of their game."

San Diego is coming off their best season since 2011-12, going from just five wins in 2017-18 to 21 this year. They are a much-improved team across the board: offensively, defensively, depth-wise and in net.

Karel Kankovsky (25-50-75) was one of three WSHL defenseman to lead their team in scoring. Only one blue liner in the league (Southern Oregon's Axel Low) produced more offense from the back end than he did.

Jakub Vesely (34-36-70) and Josef Kankovsky (12-34-46 in 33 games) are the most potent weapons up front, but Aleksis Leskinen and Ashton Jones both provided ample secondary scoring, as each hit the 20-goal mark.

2001-born Marshall McKallip assumed the #1 goaltender role around Thanksgiving and has proven capable of tremendous individual efforts to keep the Sabers in games where they are over-matched. McKallip has made 40+ saves in a game 11 times. Here's the key stat though: he has not been called upon to made more than 38 saves in a game since the end of January, indicating the Sabers may be tightening things up defensively as the playoff approach.

This series is a re-match of a 2018 division quarterfinal series, won by Fresno in two straight games.

Fresno is the higher seed, won 13 more games during the regular season, and won nine of 11 head-to-head meetings this year. They are clearly the favorites, but the Sabers are not a team they can afford to take lightly in a best-of-three series.

*--- Compiled by Scott Harrington for Harrington Sports Media*