

WSHL WEEKLY NOTES 02.16.18 – WESTERN DIVISION



Photo provided by: Mark Mauno

FRESNO MONSTERS (26-16-1, 53 pts)

@WSHLMonsters

www.FresnoMonsters.com

The Fresno Monsters are one of the hottest teams in the league, and they have ridden the wave of momentum all the way to second place in the Western Division.

Last weekend, the Monsters took care of business against San Diego as they logged a three-game sweep to complete their season series against the Sabers.

With the playoffs right around the corner, Fresno seems to be peaking at the right time. The Monsters squad today is much different than the group that lost to San Diego back in mid-October, giving the Sabers one of their three wins on the entire season.

It's going to be an intense couple of weeks for Fresno. After this week's battle against Long Beach at Selland Arena, the Monsters are scheduled to take on Ontario in a three-game set on the road that could have a significant impact on where both clubs finish in the standings.

For now, Fresno's focus is on Long Beach. It got off to a good start in the matchup with a 4-1 victory on Thursday night and will finish out the series over the next couple of days.

"If we want to have any chance at first place, we'll need a sweep," said Monsters Head Coach Kevin Kaminski before this week's series began. "We're up and ready for the challenge. This is a huge final three games at Selland not only in the standings, but for our great fans in Fresno.

"We hope to pack the rink and put on a good display of hard-nosed Monsters hockey. We found our identity and we have to go play hard every shift, be disciplined, play within our system, and execute on our chances."

Kaminski and his team will need to bring their best effort over the next few weeks as the regular season comes to a close.

Forward Joseph Aguirre (9-13-22) was brought in from the division rival Ontario Avalanche at the trading deadline

LONG BEACH BOMBERS (29-9-4, 62 pts)

@LBBombersHockey

www.JrBombers.org

Despite some marked improvement from division rivals, the Long Beach Bombers have managed to hang on to the top spot in the division.

The Bombers are coming off a split of a home-and-home series against Ontario. For much of the second half, Long Beach has struggled at times but pulled off wins when it needed them the most.

Even though the Bombers have just six games left after this weekend, their work in the regular season is far from over. Ontario or Fresno could easily overtake Long Beach if the Bombers fail to finish strong.

Following its road matchup against Fresno this weekend, Long Beach will play five of its last six games at home. Each of its remaining games will be against either Phoenix or Valencia.

While Phoenix has looked dangerous over the last month, Valencia tore down its roster at the trade deadline, shipping out much of its talent.

This week, Long Beach Head Coach Chris White pointed out a couple of players that have impressed him with their recent play.

"I think Morgan Soderstrom has been playing very well, while William Wiman has found his offensive touch and Spencer Kozlowski has played strong in net," White said. "Heading into the playoffs, we're going to need much better decision-making when we have the puck, and we need more competitiveness in the defensive zone."

Acquiring Kozlowski from Valencia two weeks ago was just the beginning of White's roster maneuvering. The Bombers also brought defensemen Lukas Moravsky and Matthew Reyes, as well as forward Melwin Thorsson, over from the Flyers.

Moravsky (4-5-9) appeared in 21 games with El Paso to start the year before being shipped to Valencia when the calendar flipped to February. The 20-year-old has now been traded twice in his first WSHL season.

Reyes (2-25-27), who was in his third year with Valencia, is a talented playmaker, while Thorsson (13-37-50) is enjoying a career year. Both players will be able to help out a Long Beach offense that ranks second in the division.

In addition, they brought back forward Joel Larsson, who was with the team last season and put up 70 points (23-47-70).

Going the other way in the Valencia trade were forward Erik Ehrmantraut and Joseph Wheeler as well as blue liners Tanner Hallett and Connor Mullin.

ONTARIO AVALANCHE (25-13-2, 52 pts)

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www.OntarioAvalanche.com

Over the past couple of weeks, the Ontario Avalanche have engaged in some intense battles with Long Beach. Unfortunately, the Avalanche dropped two of the three games they played against the Bombers.

The Avs still have 11 games left and an outside shot at the division title. They need to hope for Long Beach and Fresno to play a competitive series this weekend, with both teams winning at least once and no overtime contests.

Ontario will play what could be its biggest series of the year over the first few days of March. The three-game set against Fresno will have a playoff-like atmosphere.

Avalanche Head Coach Rob O'Rourke has high expectation for his players, and they haven't been meeting them as of late.

"Consistency and intensity," O'Rourke said. "We need to start playing playoff hockey now. I'm not a believer in just flipping a switch. We need to be better."

Forward William Ma (30-32-62) netted his team-leading 30th goal of the season last weekend in a five-point outing that led to a 7-4 victory over Long Beach.

There were high expectations for Ma heading into the season, as Ontario had to deal with the departure of some elite talent. He has thrived as a go-to option and is second on the club to Jesse Zaharichuk (21-44-65) in points.

Ontario will host Seattle in a three-game set this weekend. All six points on the table will be important, and a sweep would be huge at this point in the season.

The Avs were active at the trading deadline. They sent defensemen Adam Cech to Oklahoma City, forward Forrest Chaffee and defenseman Raymond Beaudry to Bellingham, and signed forward David Sovik and defenseman Kevin Takatch.

PHOENIX KNIGHTS (20-23-2, 42 pts)

@PhoenixKnightsJrA

www.PhoenixKnightsHockey.com

The Phoenix Knights posted a three-game sweep over new-look Valencia last weekend to push themselves within four points of the fourth-place Flyers.

The results of the series seem to represent a shift in power in the division. The Flyers have dominated the Knights for years, and Phoenix last had a winning record against Valencia in the 2011-12 season.

Phoenix is one of the main clubs that stands to benefit from Valencia's decision to clean house at the trade deadline. The two clubs will most likely face each other in

the first round of the playoffs, and the Knights will earn home-ice advantage if they can leapfrog the Flyers before the regular season ends.

Phoenix got in on the Valencia fire sale, picking up defenseman Juraj Housa from the Flyers in exchange for fellow blueliner Eric Cotton.

While Cotton's production will be missed, Housa is a former Knight who produces points (3-18-21) and has plenty of experience. He will be able to provide a strong veteran presence as a young Knights team heads into the postseason.

The Knights also acquired goaltender Rafael Gonclaves from Dallas.

The Knights will take on San Diego next weekend in their final series in front of their home fans. A sweep would mean an undefeated final homestand for Phoenix.

After this week's bye, the Knights will finish out their schedule in back-to-back weeks with the San Diego series and a three-game set on the road against Long Beach.

SAN DIEGO SABERS (3-35-3, 9 pts)

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www.SanDiegoSabersHockey.com

The San Diego Sabers continue to struggle to the finish line. The Sabers fell to a talented Fresno team in a three-game sweep last weekend and have now dropped 15 in a row.

After a 6-2 loss in the first contest, San Diego was defeated by scores of 12-0 and 7-3 over the next couple of days.

It has been a long season for San Diego, and that's not likely to change in the coming weeks. The players continue to play hard under first-year head coach Petr Kankovsky, but several factors have worked against them, including a simple lack of talent compared to elite WSHL squads.

Forward Michael Kolarik has 41 points (19-22-41) over 41 games in his first North American season. The Czech Republic native will look to reach 50 points in the coming weeks.

Karel Kankovsky (9-33-42) is also having a great year, leading the Sabers in points while sharing the team lead in games played with Kolarik and forward London Peters.

Both Kankovsky and Kolarik are listed as defensemen, meaning San Diego is the only team in league whose top two scorers are blueliners.

The Sabers stood pat at the trading deadline.

VALENCIA FLYERS (21-14-4, 42 pts)

@valenciaflyers

www.ValenciaFlyers.com

When it became clear that the Valencia Flyers were not having a season that matched up with their lofty expectations, the decision was made to start over and build for the future.

Valencia was more active than any other team at this week's trade deadline, making trades with multiple clubs and shipping out several of its veteran players.

There are seven players on the Flyers' roster who have yet to appear in a game for Valencia, and another four who have played in fewer than five contests.

It's odd to see the Flyers out of contention in the division, as the franchise has shown an ability to recruit elite talent every season. Still, the new faces will get a shot at the playoffs, as every team in the WSHL will qualify for the postseason this year.

The Flyers are coming off a stretch of six consecutive losses, including three to Phoenix last weekend. Luckily, Valencia is set to take on San Diego in a pair of home games this weekend.

The Flyers' last win came against San Diego, and it has yet to fall to the lowly Sabers this season. It will be the perfect opportunity for the new players to build chemistry and get acclimated to one another.

Overall, five of Valencia's next eight games will be played against San Diego. It should help the Flyers prepare for their two-game showdown against Long Beach during the final weekend of the regular season.

--- Jared Tennant for Harrington Sports Media