

WSHL WEEKLY NOTES 03.02.18 – WESTERN DIVISION



Photo provided by: Mark Mauno

FRESNO MONSTERS (28-16-1, 57 pts)

@WSHLMonsters

www.FresnoMonsters.com

After two weeks of preparation, the Fresno Monsters will play what is arguably their most important series of the season this weekend on the road against Ontario.

A strong second half has propelled the Monsters toward the top of the division, but they are beginning to seem like the odd man out in what was a three-team race for the division crown among themselves, Long Beach, and Ontario.

The Monsters have accumulated 57 points, seven fewer than Ontario and nine fewer than Long Beach. They will need to win out to have a shot at the first-round bye that comes with finishing as the second seed, and sweeping this weekend would be a huge step in the right direction.

"It has been some great games and a good rivalry against Ontario this year," said Monsters Head Coach Kevin Kaminski. "I wouldn't expect anything else from Rob O'Rourke's team. You look at the standings and it's no secret that we need to sweep this weekend in order to give us a chance.

"We need to make sure we are ready mentally and physically. Keep being committed to each other and the foundation, go execute, and keep having fun."

After the Ontario series, Fresno will close out its schedule with a three-game set on the road against Seattle, a struggling club it has yet to face this season.

Forwards Daylon Mannon (65-64-129) and Cody Key (51-73-124) continue to collect points at a rapid pace. The two players are second and third in the league in scoring, respectively.

Key, a fourth-year veteran, is tied with former Wichita Jr. Thunder forward Petr Cicmanec for third place on the league's all-time scoring list. While he has always possessed above-average offensive abilities, he has never had a season quite like this.

With just six games left, Key is 21 points behind Tomas Nemeth, the WSHL's second all-time scorer, who was recently leapfrogged past El Paso star Jakob Kranabetter (108-232-340). Key would need to average 3.5 points per game to catch Nemeth, a feat that will be difficult but is far from impossible.

LONG BEACH BOMBERS (31-11-4, 66 pts)

@LBBombersHockey

www.JrBombers.org

Although it has been much more difficult than they would have liked, the Long Beach Bombers remain in prime position to win the division title with five games left in the regular season.

The Bombers, who pulled ahead of the pack earlier in the season before hitting a midseason slump, are in full control of their own destiny. Their situation looks even better due to the fact that Fresno and Ontario are slated to open up a three-game series this Friday night.

The best-case scenario for Long Beach is for the Monsters and Avalanche each to pick up a few points, but for neither team to dominate the series. That would give

the Bombers plenty of breathing room at the top of the division if they take care of business in their final two series against Phoenix and Valencia.

"We control our own destiny in terms of finishing first," said Long Beach Head Coach Chris White. "So we don't need to be scoreboard watching. We need to focus on our opponents: a good Phoenix team and rival in Valencia, which always plays us tight.

"Winning the Western Division is huge for us," White continued. "All you need to do is take a quick look at our home and away records to see the value of home ice."

As White said, the discrepancy between his club's results at home and in opposing arenas is notable. The Bombers own an 18-2-2 mark in front of their hometown fans but have a much less impressive 13-9-2 record on the road.

Long Beach enters the home stretch of its regular season on this weekend as it welcomes Phoenix to The Rinks in Lakewood, California, for the two clubs' final matchup of the season. The Bombers started the series off on the right foot on Thursday evening with a 4-0 win.

ONTARIO AVALANCHE (31-13-2, 64 pts)

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www.OntarioAvalanche.com

The Ontario Avalanche briefly found themselves in first place earlier this week but were quickly jumped by Long Beach, which won a couple of rare weekday games.

Ontario needs the Bombers to lose a game or two to have a shot at winning the division. At the moment, it is two points in back of Long Beach. Both clubs have played 46 games.

Four of the Avs' final five contests will be played at home. After hosting Fresno this weekend, Ontario will play San Diego in a brief home-and-home series over the final weekend of the regular season.

First things first, though: Ontario probably needs to sweep a talented Fresno team and hope Long Beach drops a couple of games if wants to win the first division title in franchise history.

"I'm sure it will be quite a weekend," said Avs Head Coach Rob O'Rourke. "It is definitely an important series to both teams and should be as close to a playoff atmosphere as it gets."

Ontario has been eliminated by Valencia in the second round of the playoffs in each of the last two seasons. The tables seem to have turned this season, with the Flyers reeling since the trade deadline and the Avalanche playing some of their best hockey.

A second-place finish would match the club's best playoff seeding ever. Ontario needs just five points over its last five games to secure the best record in franchise history.

No matter what happens over the next few weeks, this season will be one for O'Rourke and the Avs to build on. They were able to overcome the loss of some premier talent last year to come back better than ever.

PHOENIX KNIGHTS (23-24-2, 48 pts)

@PhoenixKnightsJrA

www.PhoenixKnightsHockey.com

The Phoenix Knights are fighting hard for home-ice advantage in the first round of the playoffs. After spending most of the season far behind Valencia, Phoenix has come back to tie the fourth-place Flyers at 48 points.

The Knights are coming off their final homestand, a six-game undefeated stretch capped off by last week's three-game sweep of San Diego.

Phoenix will need at least one point in this weekend's series against Long Beach to jump ahead of Valencia. But additional points could be required since the Flyers are set this weekend to take on San Diego – the only team they have beaten since reconstructing their roster at the trade deadline.

The most likely outcome seems to be the Knights taking on the Flyers in a best-of-three first-round series in which Valencia would hold home-ice advantage.

Phoenix will enjoy a week of rest prior to the postseason, while Valencia is tasked with a three-game series against a Long Beach team that is playing for a division title.

Forward Anthony Masanotti (40-16-56) continues to impress in his rookie season. The 19-year-old recently became the first 40-goal scorer in Knights history, with a chance to add to his record this weekend.

SAN DIEGO SABERS (4-38-4, 12 pts)

@sdsabershockey

www.SanDiegoSabersHockey.com

The San Diego Sabers were unable to build off of their first win of the second half as they were swept by Phoenix over the weekend.

The series was competitive, and the Knights' 4-2 victory in the second game was the closest San Diego came to posting a victory.

This weekend, the Sabers will get another shot at Valencia, the club against which they earned three of four possible points just a couple of weeks ago.

The series should be a good opportunity to pick up some additional points and will give the Sabers a chance to win their first home game since a 3-1 triumph over Fresno back on October 15.

San Diego will definitely be hungry. Losing 16 consecutive games will give any team a strong desire to know what stringing together multiple wins feels like.

The Sabers' first-round playoff opponent is still undecided. If the playoffs started today, they would be facing Fresno on the road, but there's an outside shot that Ontario or Long Beach could fall to the third seed and be matched up with San Diego.

VALENCIA FLYERS (22-19-4, 48 pts)

@valenciaflyers

www.ValenciaFlyers.com

The Valencia Flyers were swept by Ontario last weekend before playing a competitive game against division-leading Long Beach in a 2-0 loss on Tuesday evening.

The Flyers' strong first half has allowed them to maintain possession of home-ice advantage, but that could soon change, as Phoenix has tied them in the division standings.

With four games in hand on Phoenix, Valencia is still in control. To have a chance at surpassing the Flyers, the Knights probably need multiple points against Long Beach this weekend, a tough task for any team.

Not often does someone instantly become arguably the number one goalie on a new team midway through the season, but that's exactly what has happened to the Flyers' Mack Willy.

Willy, who was playing in the NA3HL with the Great Falls Americans earlier in the season, has fought his way to a 4.37/.889 slash line. The 19-year-old has plenty of room for growth and could be a huge help to the Flyers' rebuilding efforts if he chooses to return next season.

The Flyers are on the road this weekend with three games against San Diego. A win or two over the Sabers could be enough to allow Valencia to finish ahead of Phoenix when the regular season ends next weekend.

--- Jared Tennant for Harrington Sports Media