

WSHL WESTERN DIVISION QUARTERFINAL PREVIEW



Photo provided by: Mark Mauno

#6 SAN DIEGO SABERS @ #3 FRESNO MONSTERS

Best-of-three series/all games at Gateway Ice Center – Fresno, CA

GAME 1 Friday, March 16 7:00 p.m.

GAME 2 Saturday, March 17 7:00 p.m.

GAME 3* Sunday, March 18 10:00 a.m.

**if necessary*

SEASON SERIES

Fresno 5-1-0, 10 points

San Diego 1-5-0, 2 points

October 13 Fresno 5 @ San Diego 2

October 14 Fresno 6 @ San Diego 0

October 15 Fresno 1 @ San Diego 3

February 8 San Diego 2 @ Fresno 6

February 9 San Diego 0 @ Fresno 12

February 10 San Diego 3 @ Fresno 7

PREVIOUS PLAYOFF MEETINGS

Fresno and San Diego have met in the playoffs on three separate occasions, all when the Sabers were known as the San Diego Gulls. The Monsters swept the three series, all of which were Western Division semifinals.

PLAYOFF HISTORY

Fresno – The Monsters have a history of long playoff runs, but they have failed to make it to the division finals in each of the last two seasons. Prior to that, Fresno qualified for the division finals in five of six seasons, winning the division playoffs three times. The Monsters have yet to win a Thorne Cup. The closest they came was 2013-14, when they fell to Idaho in the Pacific Conference finals.

San Diego – San Diego has not won a playoff game in the last three years. Its last postseason victory came in 2014-15, when it took down Long Beach in the Western Division quarterfinals before falling to Fresno in the semis. Through seven seasons of existence, that remains the Sabers' lone playoff series win.

FRESNO MONSTERS

Head coach: Kevin Kaminski

33-17-1, 3rd place – Western Division

298 GF / 189 GA

FRESNO SPECIAL TEAMS

POWER PLAY 56/253 (22.1%, 12th in WSHL)

PENALTY KILL 254/307 (82.7%, 9th in WSHL – 33 SHG)

KEY PLAYERS

F Daylon Mannon (75-75-150, WSHL leading scorer), F Cody Key (53-86-139), F Deivids Tempelmanis (31-43-74), D Cory Hurtubise (12-37-49), D Logan Domogala (10-29-39), D Daniel Goodwin (12-27-39), G Max Karlenzig (13-3-0/3.51/.900)

SAN DIEGO SABERS

Head coach: Petr Kankovsky

5-42-4, 6th place – Western Division

112 GF / 312 GA

SAN DIEGO SPECIAL TEAMS

POWER PLAY 46/218 (21.1%, 13th in WSHL)

PENALTY KILL 128/178 (71.9%, 21st in WSHL – 4 SHG)

KEY PLAYERS

F David Grindstaff (14-16-30), F Brad Larson (8-12-20), D Karel Kankovsky (15-34-49), D Michael Kolarik (19-23-42), D Ondrej Imrich (12-24-38), D Biko Neuenschwander (7-15-22), G Zachary Hale (3-21-2/5.38/.875)

ANALYSIS

The Fresno Monsters have put together quite a second-half run. With 15 wins in their last 17 contests, including a 10-game winning streak, the Monsters would be a tough first-round draw for any team in the WSHL. The San Diego Sabers, who are more talented than their record would indicate, will have their hands full in this best-of-three series.

The Monsters have proven they are fully capable of beating any team in the league. In mid-February, they pulled off a pivotal three-game sweep of division-leading Long Beach, and they needed all three of those wins to keep themselves in contention for a first-round bye.

For all of their struggles this season, the Sabers have given every team in the division some quality games. In the second half, a talented core of blueliners headlined by Karel Kankovsky, Michael Kolarik, and Ondrej Imrich has given San Diego a fighting chance in the majority of its recent games.

"It's gonna be a battle," said Monsters Head Coach Kevin Kaminski. "I expect San Diego to throw everything at us, so we have to be focused and prepared for 60 minutes. Play our game, use our speed and physicality, and keep our composure."

Kaminski knows the Sabers' roster has talent, and he isn't planning on taking them lightly during this weekend's series.

"We just have to play very solid, defense-first hockey," Kaminski continued. "Frustrate them offensively, and when we get our chances, relax and finish."

One of Fresno's biggest advantages in the series is the fact that it has two of the league's best players in Daylon Mannon and Cody Key. Mannon, a rookie playing for his hometown team, surpassed Ogden stud Matius Spodniak in points on the final day of the regular season. The 18-year-old became the first player in league history to score 150 points in a single season.

"I don't think it was his goal to lead the league to start out the season, but once he got confidence, he kept it up for 51 games," Kaminski said. "It has been great for us to have a guy with such great offensive instincts. He owes a lot to his line mates, Key and Tempelmanis, especially Key. They knew where they were at all times and connected from day one. It was fun to watch."

Key, who just completed his best season with the Monsters, is in third place on the WSHL's all-time scoring list with a 121-198-321 career scoring line. The four-year veteran fell six points shy of tying Tomas Nemeth for second on the list.

If San Diego wants to have any chance in this series, it will need to limit Mannon and Key's production and force the Monsters to rely on their secondary scoring options. The Sabers also need to capitalize on their power-play chances. Their power-play unit produced similar results to Fresno's at an above-average 21.1%, and establishing the power play early on the series could be what San Diego needs to push the momentum in its favor.

--- Jared Tennant for Harrington Sports Media