

WSHL WEEKLY NOTES 12.15.17 – WESTERN DIVISION



FRESNO MONSTERS (12-12-0, 24 pts)

@WSHLMonsters

www.FresnoMonsters.com

After blowing out Long Beach just a couple of weeks ago, the Fresno Monsters were looking to continue their recent success last weekend when they welcomed Ontario to Gateway Ice Center for a three-game series.

Instead, the Monsters were swept in the series as the Avalanche proved to be too much. Fresno was blown out in the opening game but kept things close over the next two days in 6-3 and 4-2 losses.

The Monsters are still clinging to third place, but Ontario is now just one point back. The race between the two clubs over the remainder of the season figures to be extremely competitive.

Fresno has completed its regular first-half schedule and now awaits the Western States Shootout next week in Las Vegas. The Monsters are slated to take on Springfield, which currently resides in third place in the Midwest Division, and West Sound and Tahoe, a pair of teams locked in a second-place tie in the Northwest.

Fresno's penalty kill is having an above-average year. The unit is currently operating at an 82.9% clip, making it one of the top 10 in the league.

The power play, on the other hand, has been middle-of-the-pack. The Monsters are scoring on just under 20 percent of their opportunities. That's not necessarily a bad number, but it pales in comparison with the percentages put up elsewhere in the league.

LONG BEACH BOMBERS (20-3-2, 42 pts)

@LBBombersHockey

www.JrBombers.org

The Long Beach Bombers continued their fierce rivalry with Valencia last weekend with a dramatic 6-5 win over the Flyers.

After the first contest in the two-game set was postponed, the Bombers fell behind 5-3 in the third period on Saturday night. However, Long Beach was able to rally with three goals in that final period to steal a win and stretch its lead to 10 points at the top of the division.

"Those two points were big for us, as we haven't been playing our best hockey as of late," said Bombers Head Coach Chris White. "Even in that game we didn't necessarily play well, but we were able to find a way to win against a good team on the road."

The Bombers have made a few roster moves, adding defenseman Tyler Browning from California Wave U16 AAA, forward Will Daigneault from the Comox Valley Glacier Kings of the Vancouver Island Junior Hockey League, and blueliner Connor Mullins, who was acquired from El Paso.

"We've added a few players recently, and this week of practice is going to be very important," said White.

The Bombers have less than a week to prepare for their brutal schedule at the WSHL Showcase that feature games against Colorado, Utah, and El Paso.

"I expect our players to be excited and focused as we take on three elite opponents," White continued. "We have a very eclectic blend of players as far as age, background, and future goals.

"I think we will have a large number of players getting interest from various levels, and I hope they put their best foot forward throughout the week."

ONTARIO AVALANCHE (11-9-1, 22 pts)

@TmOntAvs

www.OntarioAvalanche.com

Despite their fourth-place standing, the Ontario Avalanche are one of the more talented teams in the Western Division. They showed that once again last weekend with a series sweep of Fresno.

It is becoming more apparent as the season goes on that this division features the most parity of any in the WSHL. Any team can beat any other, so each club must bring its "A" game night in and night out.

The Avs are now in fantastic position to claim a top-three spot at the conclusion of the first half. They will play a three-game series against San Diego this weekend, which – based on the Sabers' record – could be an opportunity for six points.

As of now, Ontario is one point behind third-place Fresno with three games in hand on the Monsters. If it sweeps both San Diego and its games next week in Las Vegas against Springfield and Superior, Ontario could put itself within striking distance of second-seeded Valencia to open up the second half.

Forward Jesse Zaharichuk (16-23-39) has raised his level of play over the last month, and it has resulted in the best stretch of his young WSHL career. Zaharichuk, 20, has points in eight straight contests, including a three-goal, three-assist performance against Fresno last weekend.

Overall, the Alberta, Canada, native has registered at least one point in 19 of his 21 appearances this season. Ontario has to be pleased with what it

has gotten out of Zaharichuk, who has experience playing in the Western Hockey League with three different clubs.

PHOENIX KNIGHTS (8-17-2, 18 pts)

@PhoenixKnightsJrA

www.PhoenixKnightsHockey.com

The Phoenix Knights are continuing preparations for next week's Western States Shootout, where they will face off against Dallas, Seattle, and Bellingham.

After earning a couple of big wins over Fresno, the Knights were swept by El Paso in their most recent series. The Knights started the season 0-13-0, and while they have shown plenty of improvement, there is still a long road ahead. A strong showing in Las Vegas will help Phoenix prove itself to the rest of the division.

Netminder Rhett Bruckner (4.59/.877) has been put into a workhorse role for the Knights. The second-year player is improving every week after appearing in just eight games for the Las Vegas Storm last season.

Bruckner, who hails from Huntington Beach, California, owns an 8-7-2 record, meaning he has earned the decision in every game in which the Knights have earned points. He is a huge part of Phoenix's turnaround, and rookie head coach Colton St. Clair has to be pleased with what his netminder has done this year.

The official Phoenix Knights Podcast has been doing great work all season, and the team recently released a Showcase preview. You can listen to the podcast on their SoundCloud channel, which can be accessed through the team's Twitter account or Facebook page.

SAN DIEGO SABERS (1-19-1, 3 pts)

@sdsabershockey

www.SanDiegoSabersHockey.com

The San Diego Sabers are finally back this weekend with a three-game series at home against Ontario. The Sabers last played in mid-November.

The mid-season vacation, which was actually longer than San Diego's upcoming holiday break, gave the Sabers more than enough time to

regroup and hopefully get back on track. San Diego has dropped 20 of 21 games this season and, with just three points, is at the bottom of the overall league standings.

This comes just one year after finishing with more than 50 points and qualifying for the postseason in the then eight-team Western Division.

It seems to be a down year for the Sabers, but that doesn't mean the club has given up. They have played well over their past two series and will have three chances to win next week in Las Vegas with games against Wichita, Cheyenne, and Southern Oregon.

San Diego will be looking to build some sort of momentum at the tournament. If not, it could be looking at another woeful half of the season when it returns from the Christmas break.

VALENCIA FLYERS (16-7-0, 32 pts)

@valenciaflyers

www.ValenciaFlyers.com

The Valencia Flyers suffered a regulation loss in their only game last week. The Flyers blew a late lead as they fell to Long Beach for the fourth time this year in what has been quite a compelling season series.

Valencia dropped its first two games to Long Beach despite giving the Bombers their best games of the year up to that point. The Flyers got over the hump in the third meeting between the two clubs as they claimed a 5-3 win.

The rivalry figures only to get better over the second half of the season as both teams vie for playoff seeding and look to establish themselves as the class of the division.

The Flyers will use this weekend to prepare for the WSHL Showcase, where they will take a tour of the Mountain Division with games against Utah, Colorado, and Ogden. All three of those games will be held at City National Arena, the new practice facility of the NHL's Las Vegas Golden Knights.

Forward Nikita Pintusov (23-12-35) will be returning to Vegas after playing for the now-dormant Las Vegas Storm last season. Pintusov leads the

Flyers in goals this season and has been a great addition for head coach Josh Berge.

Pintusov is scoring at about the same pace he did last year, but he is surrounded by significantly more talent that he was with the Storm. The young Belarussian is only fifth on the team in points despite being the leading goal-scorer.

Pintusov has a decent shot to score 50 goals this season, especially if Valencia manages to make a long playoff run.

--- Jared Tennant for Harrington Sports Media